

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 18, Chapter 12 and 13

As we observed in our study of Nehemiah 12 last week, all the fruits of the Jews' dedication, commitment, labor and turning back to the Lord and away from their sinning ways, in sincere repentance, was finally paying off. The community from top to bottom displayed a rare unity of spirit and purpose. Their exhaustion from rebuilding the broken down walls of Jerusalem had turned to exhilaration as they marched around the tops of those massive walls in holy procession to give credit and thanks to the God of Israel who had, in His great mercy, returned the exiles to their homeland, Judah.

The overriding theme of the wall dedication was joy. Over and over the description of the scene uses the words joy and rejoice. And while this joy was on the spiritual level about the sense of reconnecting with the God of Israel, on the practical level there was now a sense of security because the rebuilt wall provided protection from the marauders and nations who might want to attack the holy city. In so many ways the rebuilding, and now dedication, of the wall is a climax to the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is perhaps the high point of a very long process of exile and restoration.

I mentioned it last week but I would like to say it again: after a long journey of running away from God, and living a sinful meaningless life, often the end of that road is pain and calamity. And when we decide to turn around and head back towards God in sincere repentance, just as often it is a long, bumpy, exhausting path to get there. Too much Christianity implies that all we have to do is fall to our knees, pray the sinner's prayer, and accept Messiah and our troubles are over. That is not the Biblical description of what usually happens, and it has not been my personal experience nor what I have seen happen with others. Obviously it is not the same for everyone in every situation.

In the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah we have watched the exiled Jews, living in the Babylonian Empire (only to have it taken over by the Persians), being freed and given the opportunity to come home. Only a few did because they well knew that the path back would be paved with sacrifice and upheaval. Most Jews, as far as we know, were living decent enough lives (in line with what others in Persian Empire were experiencing); many had productive trades and businesses. For many more they were born in Babylon and Persia and whatever their circumstance, still this was home; it was their comfort zone. Could we say that it was only that 5% who returned that represented the small fraction of Jews who truly understood what had caused their calamitous exile in the first place, and who had sincerely repented? Yes, although not without exception, I think so. Is it true repentance to admit our sin, see our wrong, and

lament over it; but then not act to overturn it?

Persia was not supposed to be the place where God's people lived. Persia was not to be their homeland; it was to be their place of punishment. The Lord had specifically assigned the Hebrews to a special plot of land, ordained by the Abrahamic Covenant, Canaan, and it was to be the Kingdom of God on earth. I have no doubt that those 95% of Jews who made the personal choice not to go back to Judah had all sorts of logical, rational, practical reasons to stay in the land of their exile. It is a modern proverb that we hear often that expresses this thought well: "Better the devil you know than the one you don't know". In other words, the modern intellectual thought is to choose the familiar (no matter how bad or wicked it might be) over the unfamiliar because you can't know for sure how the unfamiliar situation might turn out; it could be worse than where you are now. And it is the same sort of decision process that all humanity faces in all ages, even for those who profess Jesus. Following God inevitably requires hard choices and letting go of things that are familiar and comfortable and even valuable to you, for a future that you cannot know. That is the definition of faith, yet faith is the requirement.

Luke14:25-33 CJB

²⁵ Large crowds were traveling along with Yeshua. Turning, he said to them,

²⁶ "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and his sisters, yes, and his own life besides, he cannot be my talmid.

²⁷ Whoever does not carry his own execution-stake and come after me cannot be my talmid.

²⁸ "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Don't you sit down and estimate the cost, to see if you have enough capital to complete it?

²⁹ If you don't, then when you have laid the foundation but can't finish, all the onlookers start making fun of you

³⁰ and say, 'This is the man who began to build, but couldn't finish!'

³¹ "Or again, suppose one king is going out to wage war with another king. Doesn't he first sit down and consider whether he, with his ten thousand troops, has enough strength to meet the other one, who is coming against him with twenty thousand?

³² If he hasn't, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation to inquire about terms for peace.

³³ ***"So every one of you who doesn't renounce all that he has cannot be my talmid.***

Let's pick up in Nehemiah 12 verse 44.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH 12:44 – end

The opening words of this passage are “at that time” and it is connected to what has just happened: the wall dedication ceremony. It doesn't mean that it happened on the same day, just in close proximity, and that it has a connection with the wall dedication on some level. And what we see happening has an element of idealism involved with it. We ought to expect it; the residents of Judah were on a spiritual high. Very recently the entire population of Judah had agreed to a statement of faith to scrupulously obey the Torah of Moses, and what we read here is but one the articles of faith contained within the overall statement of faith that is now being implemented. Back in chapter 10 we read this:

Nehemiah 10:38-40 CJB

³⁸ ***"We will bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every kind of tree, wine and olive oil to the cohanim in the storerooms of the house of our God, along with the tenths from our land for the L'vi'im; since they, the L'vi'im, take the tenths in all the cities where we farm.***

³⁹ ***The cohen the descendant of Aharon is to be with the L'vi'im when the L'vi'im take tenths. The L'vi'im will bring the tenth of the tenth to the house of our God, to the storerooms for supplies.***

⁴⁰ ***For the people of Isra'el and the descendants of Levi are to bring the contribution of grain, wine and olive oil to the rooms where the equipment for the sanctuary, the ministering cohanim, the gatekeepers and the singers are. We will not abandon the house of our God."***

So now we read that indeed men have been assigned to oversee the treasury chambers and to assure that the tithes are brought to the house of God and distributed to the Temple workers. And, we again find the use of the word “joy” as the dominant attitude of all Judah towards the giving of these tithes to the Levites and Priests because they felt so good about knowing that these Temple servants were faithfully doing the work assigned to them by God. All was working as it should.

We also see that the system of setting up a rotation of priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, etc., that David had instituted and that Solomon had continued had become the standard that was being followed. And I want to comment that there was nothing wrong with setting up such a system because nothing about it violated God's commandments, and it created order, which itself reflects God's nature.

The final verse of chapter 12 makes it clear that it wasn't just now with Nehemiah (around 440 B.C.) that this orderly system of Temple service was reinstated; it goes back to the time of Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. as he led the first wave of Jewish exiles back to Judah about a century earlier. Thus the point of the final passage is this: the entire Jewish lay community supported the Temple more than merely willingly; they were enthusiastic and joyful. They didn't see what they tithed as being a tax, but rather as a happy obligation that was to their benefit.

But how much of what they did was because their hearts had fundamentally changed thanks to Ezra's teachings and Nehemiah's steadfast leadership, versus simply riding the emotional high of the lofty events of the last few weeks? As another modern proverb rightly says: "What goes up must come down". That's what we're about to see in Chapter 13.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 13 all

As we enter the final chapter of Nehemiah we again hear the opening words: "at that time". Some scholars want to link this passage to the final verses of chapter 12 that we just studied, and that could well have been. However these words are not trying to give us a precise time but only an approximation. And the phrase "at that time" needs to be mostly associated with the next few words that say, "When they were reading the scroll of **Moshe**". So the idea probably is that when they were assembled and the Torah was being taught, what follows next is what happened. And the Priests were apparently reading to the people in Deuteronomy chapter 23, where we find this:

Deuteronomy 23:4-5 CJB

⁴ "No 'Amoni or Mo'avi may enter the assembly of ADONAI, nor may any of his descendants down to the tenth generation ever enter the assembly of ADONAI, ⁵ because they did not supply you with food and water when you were on the road after leaving Egypt, and because they hired Bil'am the son of B'or from P'tor in Aram-Naharayim to put a curse on you.

Bottom line is that foreigners were not to be allowed into the congregation of God. This is not the first time we've heard this in Ezra and Nehemiah however here it is quite specific about

which foreigners this is speaking. And verse 3 tells us that the Jews of Judah set about to obey this command.

Verse 3 presents us with an interesting scenario. We'll read a number of English translations about just who it was that were being excluded from the congregation of Israel. Our CJB says it was "everyone of mixed ancestry". The RSV says, "All those of foreign descent". The Greek Septuagint says, "Every alien in Israel". The KJV says, "All of the mixed multitude". And there are other versions that say it differently from these. The issue centers around the translation of the Hebrew word **ereb** (that is pronounced like the more modern word Arab). It is an unusual word for the context, thus the question is always exactly what group this is referring to.

If we go back to the Torah in the book of Exodus, however, we find this same word used in a way that is familiar to us. And using the most standard English translations of Exodus 12:38, we read this as used in the KJV:

^{KJV} **Exodus 12:38 *And a mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle.***

There where we find the term "mixed multitude" that is also attempting to translate the Hebrew **ereb**. So what it seems to be getting at in Nehemiah 13:3 isn't about people of mixed blood (that is, the products of interbreeding among various races), but rather various people of any and all races who are not Hebrews. And further, unlike the event of Ezra 10 that involved families being dissolved through divorce from foreign women, that sort of thing is not at all implied here. Rather the issue is that non-Hebrews may not be part of a sacred gathering for the purposes of worship and sacrifice to the God of Israel. How do I know that? Notice the context: they were at some sort of sacred gathering where the Torah of Moses was being read.

So the idea is NOT that all foreigners (non-Hebrews) were expelled from Jerusalem or from Judah. Nor is this a call for marriage unions of Hebrews to non-Hebrews to be terminated. Rather foreigners were not to participate in sacred Hebrew assemblies.

I also want to address a problem here that is challenging on the one hand, but not so much on the other. Our Western Christian worldview reads into these verses that no gentile (that's what a foreigner means) can become part of Israel through marriage or otherwise. Or at least no gentile from the Ammonites or Moabites can be included in Israel. But it must be understood that in our day the religious sphere is considered as completely independent from our race or our heritage. For example being Hispanic doesn't automatically mean that you are Catholic. Being from Germany doesn't automatically mean you are Lutheran. Being from England doesn't make you Anglican and being an Arab doesn't automatically mean you are Muslim;

they are separate issues. But this was not so in the Bible era. Your race and heritage determined your religion; the two were organically connected. An Ammonite worshipped their chief god who was Molech. A Moabite worshipped their chief god who was Chemosh. And it didn't change just because you migrated and moved to Judah. However a person from Ammon or Moab could renounce their god and accept the god of another race or nation. By doing that they have changed not just their religion but their national identity since the two are indelibly connected. Thus, for instance, Ruth was born a Moabite (a worshipper of Chemosh); however at one point she gave up Chemosh worship and adopted Yehoveh worship. Now she was a Hebrew both religiously and nationally. Who could forget those inspiring words of confession and conversion?

Ruth 1:16-17 CJB

¹⁶ But Rut said, "Don't press me to leave you and stop following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die; and there I will be buried. May ADONAI bring terrible curses on me, and worse ones as well, if anything but death separates you and me."

She used to be a Moabite, but no more. So in the Bible when we read of people living in Israel or Judah and they are called by a certain nationality or race and it is not the Hebrew nationality or race, it is automatic that they remained pagan. So a reference to a "foreign wife" of a Jew necessarily means that this woman not only was born of a foreign race and nation, but stayed identified with this foreign race and nation and most importantly with that nation's god. And the same goes for any gentile person, married to a Hebrew or not.

Naturally our text doesn't explain all that because this social/religious convention was understood and was a basis of all cultures of the Bible era, and as far as the writers of the Bible were concerned they had created a document that would be read by people of their own Israelite culture; therefore no explanation was needed.

So the first 3 verses show a continuing concern to faithfully follow God's Torah, including barring foreigners from Israel's religious rituals, even if it negatively affected the economy and created some hurt feelings or even civil discord. But beginning in verse 4 the other side of the coin appears. The statement "prior to this" means that what we're about to be told happened before the separating of the foreigners from Israel in verses 1 – 3. And it explains that ***Elyashiv*** the cohen, the priest, was the one put in charge as the supervisor over the storage rooms at the Temple that were used for collecting the tithes of food to be distributed to the Levites and Priests. However this was probably not the same ***Elyashiv*** that was the current High Priest. We talked last week about the difficulties with names in the Bible because

essentially people didn't have first and last names, but rather just one name; many people shared that same name. And like in our day, there would be cycles of name popularity that came and went, and so there would always be a larger than typical number of certain names in use for a time as fathers and mothers chose those currently popular names for their children.

The **Elyashiv** in this passage was indeed a priest, a **cohen**, and so had rightful access to anti-rooms attached to the Temple structure, although he wasn't the High Priest. But even more important he was close with the foreign potentate **Toviyah** who a few years earlier had made such trouble for Nehemiah and the wall building project. In fact, just to refresh our memories here is a brief summary of what role **Toviyah** had played to this point.

^{CJB} **Nehemiah 4:1** *But when Sanvalat, Toviyah, the Arabs, the 'Amonim and the Ashdodim heard that the repairs on the walls of Yerushalayim were going forward, and the breaks were being filled in, they became very angry. ² All of them together plotted to come and fight against Yerushalayim and thus throw us into confusion.*

This is the same **Toviyah** and it boggles the mind that this influential priest who oversaw the storage rooms at the Temple had a close and friendly relationship with him. In fact, **Elyashiv** and Toviyah had become family through intermarriage. To make matters even worse Toviyah was from Ammon (one of the named people groups of which God ordered Israel to have no relations). But to top it all off, **Elyashiv** gave one of these sacred Temple chambers that were supposed to be used for food storage for the Temple workers to Toviyah to use for his own personal purposes!

Verse 6 is the kicker: this was happening because Nehemiah had been recalled to Babylon by King Artaxerxes after having stayed for 12 years in Jerusalem. So essentially the scenario is that the Jewish leader left for a time, and every reform that he and Ezra had instituted began to unravel in his absence. One of the debates among scholars is how long Nehemiah might have been gone for all this to happen. In reality it is all speculative because we're not given any clues that might tell us. So what can we say about this with any degree of certainty? Very little. We are told that Nehemiah asked for permission to come back to Judah, which means that it was his request to return to Jerusalem as opposed to the King sending him back on a royal mission. One has to at least reasonably suspect that just as before his first trip to Jerusalem when he got word of the bad conditions in Judah by means of a message from his brother Hanani, that he also received news of the rapidly deteriorating circumstances that is leading to his 2nd trip.

And the first thing Nehemiah did was to toss Toviyah out on his ear, remove all his stuff from the Temple storage room, and bring back everything that had been removed from it that belonged there in the first place. This seemed to include Temple implements as well as food

stores. We begin to see a side of Nehemiah emerge that we had little hint of in earlier parts of the Book. We have known Nehemiah to be a cool customer, thoughtful but frank in his responses to opponents as well as allies, and who understood politics and how to deal with politicians. No doubt he was strong willed, not easily bent, and exuded a confident persona. But now we start to see an anger and fury in him that until now he had felt the need to control; but no longer.

The situation, however, was even worse than Nehemiah had feared. The tithes that the statement of faith had promised, and the vow agreement of all the people to properly support the Temple and the Temple workers (something that God commanded in the Law), had ceased to be operative. The Levites now had no means left to them of making a living to feed their families except to abandon their Temple occupations in order to farm. Verse 11 is very telling and it something that we all should pay attention to: Nehemiah says that to stop supporting the Temple workers is to abandon the house of God. If we'll look back to chapter 10 we'll see that the people and the leaders had sworn to uphold a statement of faith that consisted of 7 articles:

1. Obedience to God's Torah as the source of Law and truth.
2. Marriage.
3. Shabbat.
4. Shmittah (Sabbatical year)
5. Supporting the Temple and Priesthood
6. Providing for the Altar
7. Firstlings

So far, in just a handful of years since the people had pledged with joy to uphold this creed, item by item they broke their promises. In fact the final words of chapter 10 help us to understand why Nehemiah chose the words he did to describe what the people had done. Nehemiah 10:40 (which takes place at the ceremony where everyone agrees with the statement of faith) ends with: "We will not abandon the house of God". To which Nehemiah here in Chapter 13 responds upon his return to Jerusalem: "Why is this house of God abandoned?"

It is interesting to me that Nehemiah equates disobedience to God's Torah as regards supporting the Temple with abandoning the house of God. And regularly we read in the Torah and the Tanach that God says that He equates His people's general disobedience to Him as abandoning Him. That is something we need to think long and hard about because many modern Believers have the tendency to assume that despite lapses in our adherence to God's principles, or an ebbing of our faithful service to the Lord (in whatever capacity) that WE shall determine whether (and to what measure) we've incurred any harm to our relationship with God. What this usually amounts to is denial, or worse, a false security that comes with thinking that upon acceptance of Christ as Savior that all obligation and obedience to Him ends. The Lord says that at some point He considers such behavior and attitude as abandonment.

Nehemiah had the authority to do more than just chastise; he could coerce. There is no hint that when he went back to Babylon at the call of his King that he lost his title of **Tirshita**, governor, of Judah. And by the way, for those paying close attention, why is King Artaxerxes called the King of Babylon, and why is it said that Nehemiah journeyed back to Babylon? After all a century had gone by since control of the Empire had passed from Babylon to Persia. The Babylonian Empire was no more. The reason is quite simple, actually. Babylon was one of 4 places where the Persian King had palaces; each apparently used on a seasonal basis. And since Babylon was the capital city of the previous Empire (and the city had not been destroyed), the King of Persia would of course have been seen as the de facto King over Babylon even if his official, technical office was King of Persia. If we take the Scriptures at its word then when Nehemiah returned north it was indeed to the city of Babylon since that is where King Artaxerxes must have been currently residing.

Nehemiah not only banished Toviya, he also took **Elyashiv's** authority over the storage rooms away from him and gave it to 3 men: a priest named **Shelemiah**, a Torah teacher named **Tzadok**, and a common Levite named **P'dayah**. Further he authorized an assistant to them, the son of a fellow named **Zakur**. Nehemiah must have had firsthand knowledge of, and experience with, these men as he pronounced them all "reliable". He made it their personal responsibility to assure that the Levites and Priests received the full measure of what they were due.

Nehemiah is the example of Godly leadership that all Believers in leadership ought to strive for. He was a man of high moral principle, who obtained his morals from God's Word, not politically correct trends or his own version of right and wrong. But he was also a man of action. Popularity played little role in his life. Principle without deeds is pointless. Intention without action is dishonest. Bowing to pressure from the enemy, or even to the wrong desires of the crowd, is cowardly. And Nehemiah proved himself to be none of these.

Nehemiah's actions might seem harsh to us (and no doubt did to those directly affected). However when one stares down rebelliousness, wickedness, and the enemy, drawing a line will always be met with resistance, accusations, and disagreement. Nehemiah's unstated motto was: "holiness is not negotiable".

H.G.M. Williamson puts it this way: "From a position of strength and security it is possible to help, forgive, and welcome; but in weakness, both parties will sink together".

Next week we'll conclude the Book of Nehemiah.