

**Let Us Arise and Build  
(Lessons from Nehemiah)  
Conserving Revival—Don't Go Backward!**

**Intro:** As we have followed the story of Nehemiah, we have seen how God's people worked together to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem that had been destroyed by the Babylonians over a 144 years before. Remarkably in 52 days, with the leadership of Nehemiah and the hard and cooperative work of all the people, they cleared the rubble and repaired the walls and restored the gates of the city—a remarkable story.

But that effort was the starting point for a spiritual revival as well. No wall, no matter how strong, could protect a people whose lives were disobedient to the Lord. Therefore it was imperative that God's people experience spiritual revival. Both Nehemiah and Ezra the priest led them toward this renewal by 1) reading the Law; 2) reinstituting divinely-commanded worship; 3) confessing sin; and 4) committing to personal holiness.

After the wall had been repaired and the people had renewed their commitment, Nehemiah instituted the process of making Jerusalem a populous and holy city once more, filling it with people who wanted to live near the Lord. All of this was capped off with a formal dedication of the work to God involving the joyous reflection upon what He had done among them and honoring him by praise and sacrifice.

The dedication of Nehemiah 12 would certainly be considered the high point of the book of Nehemiah; but there is one more part of the story that must be told. One question remains: How would the people respond to this new beginning? Would they keep the covenant promises they had made? Would they hold on to the spiritual gains they had made? Or would they fall back into the old habits that had led to their downfall? Regrettably with some, it was the latter.

**Five Lapses in Holiness Among the People of God**

*Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to find that all was not well.*

After having served as governor of Israel for approximately twelve years; Nehemiah returned to King Artaxerxes for a time around 432 BC. He notes in connection with one of the issues raised in this chapter:

*But 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," (Nehemiah 13:6)*

When he returned to Jerusalem, he found that there were significant compromises of God's law among the Lord's people. Chapter 13 describes Nehemiah's efforts to restore God's people back to the holy life they had pledged to live. He documents five areas where the

people failed to be a holy people separated from foreign influence.  
Consider these examples:

***First, they allowed those forbidden by God to enter into the worship assembly of Israel.***

God's people had formerly pledged to separate themselves from foreigners; yet Nehemiah observed:

*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 it came about, that when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel.”* (Nehemiah 13:1–3)

Under the Law God had forbidden certain foreigners, Ammonites and Moabites, to have access to the temple courts (Deut. 23:3ff). The people had promised to separate themselves from foreigners (10:28). In view of this command and to their credit, God's people purposed to refuse these foreigners entrance into the worship assembly of Israel.

***Second, Eliashib the priest allowed Tobiah the Ammonite official to dwell in the temple courts.***

*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)

Later Nehemiah notes:

*“and 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.”* (Nehemiah 13:7)

This was problematic at several levels:

First it was a misuse of the rooms in the temple area which were built to be storerooms for the tithes that were brought to the priests.

Second it resulted in defilement of the temple courts since Tobiah was ceremonially unclean and established precedent for other Ammonites to come into the temple courts

Third Tobiah in particular had been one of the foremost enemies of Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls (He was the one who made the snide remark about the walls being so weak a fox would break them down); yet he was given a place of influence among the Jews. Eliashib's convictions were weakened by the fact that he had some relation to Tobiah and perhaps also because he was an important man.

Nehemiah took decisive action to remove Tobiah from this place. His actions are reminiscent of Jesus' cleansing the temple in John 2—

basically throwing Tobiah's stuff out and having the rooms consecrated to their original purposes.

***Third, the people had neglected to bring the promised tithes to the priests and Levites, forcing them to abandon the temple and make a living in the fields.***

*"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.*

The Lord in the Law had made provision that the Levites be cared for so that they could devote themselves to the worship of God and the instruction of the people; but they could not do this if they were not properly supported. In addition, the people had earlier pledged to support the priests (Neh. 10:34-39).

Nehemiah acted decisively to correct the situation:

*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. And 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.*

And he appealed to God to remember his zeal for the Law:

*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."*

(Nehemiah 13:10-14)

***Fourth, the people violated the Sabbath by working and by selling food in the city on the Sabbath.***

*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. Also 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.*

This was a clear violation of the Law, since commercial activity would be considered work. This was a knowing violation since they had previously pledge not to engage in commerce on the Sabbath or any holy day (10:31).

Again Nehemiah took decisive action to solve these problems. First he rebuked the nobles whose commercial interests had prompted the violation.

*Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? Did 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.””  
(Nehemiah 13:15–18)*

Then he made provision to bar the merchants from the city on the Sabbath.

*“And it 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 that no load should enter on the sabbath day. Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. Then 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. And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day.*

And once more he appeals to God not to forget his efforts.

*For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Thy lovingkindness.”  
(Nehemiah 13:19–22)*

**God’s people intermarried with pagans.**

*“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.” (Nehemiah 13:23–24)*

Though foreigners could through conversion become members of the covenant community, there is no indication that these foreigners were converted at all. It was a compromise of the principle of Deut 7, where God had forbidden intermarriage with idolaters lest they lead God’s people astray. It also violated the pledge the people had made not to marry idolaters (10:30).

Nehemiah acted decisively to correct this; and his actions might violate our sensibilities; but it was a very serious problem.

*“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 questioned their spiritual strength to resist the influences of idolatry so close to them:

*Did 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. “Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?”*

*Remarkably the very grandson of the high priest (surely someone who ought to know better) had married the daughter of Israel's enemy Sanballat.*

*Even 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.*

Once more Nehemiah appeals to the Lord for consideration:

*Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.” (Nehemiah 13:25–29)*

**Nehemiah summarizes:**

*“Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.” (Nehemiah 13:30–31)*

Nehemiah had taken seriously the principle of national holiness and had taken steps to ensure the faithfulness of the Lord's people.

**Three Important Observations about Relationship with God**

Tonight I want to follow up with an application lesson for us today from this text; but let me make three important observations about relationship with God taught in this text. I like the way it is expressed by Warren Wiersbe in his *With the Word* Commentary. God is looking for three things:

***Separation***

The people had mixed with the pagans, the priest had let the enemy into the temple, and Jewish parents were allowing their children to marry pagan mates (vv. 23–27). The walls of the city were still strong, but the spiritual walls of separation were crumbling.

***Stewardship***

The people had promised to support the temple ministry but had not been faithful to bring the required tithes and offerings. Decreased giving is often a sign of diminished spiritual vitality.

***Sacrifice***

God gave them six days for work and business and asked for only one day for Himself, but some people robbed Him of that (vv. 15–22). They were actually robbing themselves of blessing and of the opportunity to witness to the pagans around them.<sup>1</sup>

**Conclusion: It is imperative as God's people that we follow-through on our commitments. God does not want just empty promises, but changed lives of obedience to Him.**

**Are you giving the Lord what you promised? Or have you gone backward in your spiritual life?**

---

<sup>1</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1991). *With the Word Bible Commentary* (Ne 13:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.