

ZEAL FOR THE LORD: NEHEMIAH 13:1-31

“...during the half-century that I have been a Christian [Nehemiah] has helped me enormously, more perhaps than any other Bible character apart from the Lord Jesus Christ...no one should wonder, therefore, that I now regard him as a particular friend.” - J.I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 29.

I. Review

- A. The people celebrated the Passover and gave themselves to a covenant before the Lord: “Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them...Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.” (Neh 9:34, 38)
- B. Nehemiah has done the hard work of organizing the repopulation of Jerusalem: “Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. ² And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.” (Neh 11:1-2)
- C. The wall has been built and dedicated to the Lord with great joy (!): “And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.” (Neh 12:43)

II. Nehemiah 13:1-3

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, ² 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. ³ As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

1. During the dedication ceremony, what event did the people discover from the law of Moses (especially Deut 23)? What was going on in Israel’s history at that time? Is this a proof-text for racism?

“God said to Balaam, ‘You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.’” (Num 22:12)

“And the ass said unto Balaam, ‘Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since was thine unto this day? Was I ever wont to do so unto thee?’ And he said, ‘Nay.’” (Num 22:30, KJV)

III. Nehemiah 13:4-31

⁴ Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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 ⁷ 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. ⁸ And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. 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.

¹⁰ 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. 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. ¹² Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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! ¹⁷ Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ 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."

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. ²¹ 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. ²² 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.

²³ In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?"

²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

³⁰ Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; ³¹ and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good. (Neh 13:1-31)

1. What is going on in the temple when Nehemiah returns? Is he high and mighty, throwing his weight around? What is he angry about, specifically?

"If you hate sin as sin, you will be watchful against everything that grieves the Spirit. Do you think God will free you from this [one sin] so you can commit another sin against him? 'No', says God... 'We must not be concerned only with that which troubles us, but with all that troubles God. God's work is to have full victory, and universal obedience, not just the sins that trouble our soul.'" - John Owen, Works, VI: 40-42

2. Before we rush to judgment about Nehemiah, have you ever been angry over the treatment of God's holy name?
3. What is the second thing Nehemiah discovers (vv. 10-14)? Why might the Levites been disillusioned? Where did Nehemiah lay the blame (see Neh 10:39)?
4. What is the third thing that Nehemiah discovers (vv. 19-22)? How does Nehemiah respond (3 things)?
5. Does anything arouse you to such passion (the equivalent of physical violence?!) regarding God's things? What about the Sabbath?
6. What is the fourth thing Nehemiah discovered (vv. 23-27)?
7. Again, is Nehemiah a bully? Or is he instead what the church needs today?

**But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed,
but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. (Heb 10:39)**