



## Nehemiah - Chapter Thirteen

### **VI Nehemiah 12:44-13:31 - Nehemiah Deals with Problems in the Community (continues/concludes)**

#### Summary of Chapter Thirteen

Because of what was written in the book of the law about Ammonites and Moabites, the people separated themselves from anyone of foreign descent.

Nehemiah had returned to see the king of Persia as he had promised to do. While he was away, Eliashib had made provision for Tobiah to have a room in the courts of the temple contrary to the law. On his return, Nehemiah forcibly removed Tobiah and all his belongings. Nehemiah also learned that the correct provision for the Levites had not been made and so he remonstrated with the officials over their neglect of this important act in the house of God.

The people were working and carrying on acts of commerce on the Sabbath so Nehemiah remonstrated with the nobles over this profanity. In addition, foreign traders were coming into the city of the Sabbath to sell their goods. Nehemiah ordered that all commerce should cease on the Sabbath and that the gates of the city should be locked before sunset as the Sabbath commenced. Some traders camped outside the city walls on the eve of the Sabbath but were warned to stay away, removing the temptation to the Jews to trade with them.

There also remained the problem of marriage to foreigners to the point where the children could not even speak the language of Judah. Nehemiah warned the people that this was contrary to God's law and used the example of Solomon's unwise marriages to foreign women that led him to apostasy. All such marriages were then forbidden. A son of Eliashib, who was the son of the high priest Jehoiada, refused to give up his foreign wife and was excluded from the community.

## VI.b. Nehemiah 13:1-3 - Foreigners Separated from Israel

Because the law stated that no Ammonite or Moabite should enter into the assembly of God the people of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners.

<sup>1</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them – yet our God turned the curse into a blessing.

### Nehemiah 13:1-2

On that day. This was still the day of the dedication of the wall when the people celebrated in the presence of God and here the book of Moses, probably Deuteronomy, was once again read to the people; refer also to Nehemiah 8:18, 9:3 and 12:44.

No Ammonite or Moabite. This text closely follows Deuteronomy 23:3-5, which expressly excluded Moabites and Ammonites from the religious assembly of Israel for several generations because of their historical enmity against Israel and their infectious idolatry; refer to Numbers Chapters 22-25. As the people drew near to God in worship, as seen in Nehemiah Chapters 11 and 12, they became aware of God's standards. In this case it was the standard stated in Deuteronomy 23:3-4, where the Ammonites and Moabites were not to be regarded as part of Israel.

Should ever enter the assembly of God. This meant they could not be regarded as one of the people of Israel or the people of God. Being part of the assembly, which Gentiles could enter by becoming proselytes, meant one could fully participate in the spiritual life of Israel. An Israelite became a part of God's covenant by birth; but an Ammonite or Moabite could not. They had to become a part of the covenant by choice - by joining with God's covenant people and leaving their own people. This command was a powerful message - both then and now. It said to these Ammonites and Moabites, "You are not a part of the people of God by birth. You must make a choice. You cannot live by the thinking and deeds of your anti-God culture, and truly join in the spiritual life of God's people. Unless you fully leave one and join the other, you will never really be a part of this spiritual life. Come join us!"

Because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water. The Ammonites and Moabites were singled out because of their devious schemes against Israel, when Israel came into the Promised Land - almost a thousand years before this. Long before the Ammonites and Moabites had schemed against Israel, God had made a promise to the father of the Jewish people, Abraham <<*I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the*

*families of the earth shall be blessed*>> (Genesis 12:3). The command about the Ammonites and the Moabites is a simple fulfilment of this promise.

Yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. This refers to the events of Numbers Chapters 22-24, where God blessed Israel, even though the prophet Balaam was employed by Balak the king of Moab to curse them. It is a reminder that God is able - more than able - to turn any curse into a blessing.

<sup>3</sup> When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

### Nehemiah 13:3

They separated from Israel all those of foreign descent. This resembles the measures taken by Ezra a decade or so earlier in Ezra Chapters 9-10, but there is no sign here of compulsory divorce. Refer to Ezra 6:21, which allowed foreigners to join Israel if they embraced the Jewish religion, as in the Book of Ruth, who was a Moabite: <<*So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab*>> (Ruth 1:22a).

They could have thought of twenty reasons to not do what the Word of God plainly told them to do. Instead, they simply obeyed. They might have made familiar excuses:

- “That command was made long ago, and speaks to a different time.”
- “Things are different now.”
- “Let’s not go overboard.”
- “Let’s assign a task force to examine the issue.”

### VI.c. Nehemiah 13:4-14 - The Reforms of Nehemiah

Nehemiah’s opponents were as resilient as he was. His absence led to setbacks. Still in connection with the ceremony of dedication, a new resolution is made in respect to protecting the community from foreign religion.

When Nehemiah returned from a promised visit to the king of Persia he found that Eliashib, the son of the high priest, had provided accommodation for his relative Tobiah, an opponent of Nehemiah, within the temple complex. He also found that the due portions of the offerings had not been made according to the law. Both of these things were contrary to the Law of Moses, which made Nehemiah angry and so he dealt with these issues.

<sup>4</sup> Now before this, the priest Eliashib, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, <sup>5</sup> prepared for Tobiah a large room 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. <sup>6</sup> While this was taking place I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes of Babylon I went to the king. After some time I asked leave of the king <sup>7</sup> and returned to Jerusalem. I then discovered the wrong that Eliashib had done on behalf of Tobiah, preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. <sup>8</sup> And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the room. <sup>9</sup> Then I gave orders and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back the vessels of the house of God, with the grain-offering and the frankincense.

### Nehemiah 13:4-9

Now before this. The time is unspecified.

The connection of these verses with vv.1-3 lies in the fact that Tobiah, already known to be an enemy of the community from Nehemiah 2:10 and 4:7-8, was an Ammonite. Eliashib's offense is also related to the theme of the proper administration of tithes and offerings mentioned in Nehemiah 12:44, because Tobiah has been given a room in the temple reserved for these.

I was not in Jerusalem. When Nehemiah was given leave of absence, the king had required him to name a time for his return: <<*The king said to me (the queen also was sitting beside him), 'How long will you be gone, and when will you return?' So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date*>> (Nehemiah 2:6). It is not clear whether he had travelled more than once between Jerusalem and the royal court. In any case, he is now called back in the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, i.e. 433 BC, for an unspecified time believed by the Jews to be between ten and twelve years. The journey to Susa took about 55 days to travel the 1,100 miles or 1,770 km, and another 55 days to return, averaging 20 miles or 32 km per day. Eliashib may have been opposed to Nehemiah's policy of strict separation from the community's neighbours and thus may have taken advantage of his lengthy absence.

**Nehemiah left sometime after the remarkable spiritual revival noted in the recent chapters. However, the real test of revival - the real test of God's work in the lives of his people - is the long term. It is seeing where his people are with the Lord ten years after a season of great work.**

King Artaxerxes of Babylon is an unexpected name for the Persian Artaxerxes; but refer also to Ezra 5:13 and 6:22, where Persian kings are called king of Babylon and Assyria respectively. This is because the successive empires in some sense took on the identity of their predecessors. In addition, Artaxerxes might actually have

been holding court in Babylon at the time. Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem must have been before Artaxerxes' death in 423 BC.

I then discovered the wrong that Eliashib had done on behalf of Tobiah. When Nehemiah came back he saw that Eliashib the priest had entered into agreements with one of the enemies of Nehemiah's work of rebuilding the wall - Tobiah.

Incidentally, Tobiah was an Ammonite according to Nehemiah 2:10 - one of the very mixed multitude that had been put out of the assembly of God's people some 10 years before. At this point in the record of Nehemiah, Tobiah was not only present among the assembly, he actually rented rooms in the temple courts. Apparently, Tobiah had not changed over the years. He did not join the people of God in the terms of God's covenant. The problem was evident to Nehemiah but Eliashib was completely blind to it, or chose to be at least.

And I was very angry or it grieved me bitterly. There were many reasons why this was so distressing to Nehemiah:

- Because rooms in the courts of the temple of God were being occupied by a man not only a pagan but who also had a history of actively opposing God's work in the days of Nehemiah.
- Because it reflected so badly on Eliashib, a priest who was a spiritual leader in Israel, and those around him. It showed that if Eliashib was blind to a problem area; there was also no one around him who could confront him with the problem.
- Because it made Nehemiah question the lasting value of the spiritual revival he witnessed when last in Jerusalem.

Then I gave orders and they cleansed the chambers, that is, purified in a ritual sense. Nehemiah sees the misuse of the temple as a desecration. He restores the polluted area to its proper use.

Nehemiah is much like Jesus when he cleansed the temple from those who profaned it: <<*In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!'*>> (John 2:14-16). Both Jesus and Nehemiah had the wisdom to not confuse love with being 'nice' - and the wisdom to know when to take bold action.

<sup>10</sup> I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them; so that the Levites and the singers, who had conducted the service, had gone back to their fields. <sup>11</sup> So I remonstrated with the

officials and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken?’ And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. <sup>12</sup> Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. <sup>13</sup> And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses the priest Shelemiah, the scribe Zadok, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan son of Zaccur son of Mattaniah, for they were considered faithful; and their duty was to distribute to their associates. <sup>14</sup> 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 13:10-14

I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them. The incident in the temple was not isolated, for the provision for the clergy had effectively lapsed and, as a result, the worship itself had suffered because the clergy had to leave Jerusalem, which was disastrous for the community. Contrast this with the commitments made by the people in Nehemiah 10:32-39. Nehemiah once again puts the administration of the offerings on a firm footing, so that the restored community can actually live out its covenant privilege.

So I remonstrated with the officials. Nehemiah’s fearless action here and in v.17 should be noted. Sometimes leadership requires such confrontation, however unpalatable it may seem at the time.

Why is the house of God forsaken? The lack of giving was a way of forsaking the house of God and, indeed, the Lord himself: <<*Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In your tithes and offerings!*>> (Malachi 3:8).

I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Nehemiah set the situation right by expecting the Levites and the singers to recommit to the work of serving God and his people as they should. He also reorganised the collection and accounting of the people’s tithes and gifts. No blame should be attached to these men for apparently abandoning their work for they relied on the offerings to feed themselves and their families. Without it they had to seek an alternative.

Remember me. This prayer, asking in typical idiom that God should take note of his faithful actions, somewhat resembles certain psalms, in which the psalmist pleads his righteousness in the context of praise, e.g. Psalm 7 and 17; refer also to Nehemiah 1:8, 5:19, 6:14, and v.22 and vv.29-30 below.

#### VI.d. Nehemiah 13:15-22 - Sabbath Reforms Begun

The community once again sins, this time by breaking the Sabbath, which leads Nehemiah to rebuke the people. Because the people were ignoring the Sabbath

and were either working or engaged in commerce, Nehemiah instructed that the gates of the city be closed from sunset on the eve of the Sabbath to exclude foreign traders. He also stopped the Jews from working or trading on the Sabbath.

<sup>15</sup> In those days I saw in Judah people treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys; and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day; and I warned them at that time against selling food. <sup>16</sup> Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of merchandise and sold them on the sabbath to the people of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

### Nehemiah 13:15-16

In those days I saw in Judah people treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys. The people of Judah break the Sabbath by working and trading. The Sabbath was being ignored in disobedience to God's clear command under the Old Covenant. Foreigners sold and the people of Israel bought. At the root, this was a problem of priorities. There is nothing wrong with buying and selling, only when the desire to buy and sell, to make money or spend money, becomes more important to God's people than honouring God does. This was a clear way the people of Israel were putting their personal finances before glorifying God.

The NT makes it clear that Christians are not under the law of the Sabbath in the same sense Israel was under the Old Covenant: <<*Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ*>> (Colossians 2:16-17); but they are certainly under the same obligation to make honouring God more important than making spending money.

Tyrians are those from the city of Tyre, a great centre of commerce especially goods brought in by ship. Foreigners would not be bound by the Sabbath law, of course, but they find a ready market among the Jews who were bound by it.

<sup>17</sup> Then I remonstrated with the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the sabbath day?

<sup>18</sup> Did not your ancestors act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring more wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath.'

### Nehemiah 13:17-18

Did not your ancestors act in this way? Breaches of the Sabbath were a telling aspect of previous generations' lax attitude toward the Torah; refer to Jeremiah 17:19-27 and Amos 8:4-6. Here, the exile is attributed to it.

Yet you bring more wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath. Nehemiah knew that sin was not only a personal issue. When such open sin is winked at and left uncorrected among God's people, it invites the correcting hand of God. Nehemiah was not going to sit still for this; he threatened, "If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!" He did not mean the gentle laying on of hands for prayer but the rough laying on of hands for correction.

<sup>19</sup> When it began to be 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 set some of my servants over the gates, to prevent any burden from being brought in on the sabbath day. <sup>20</sup> Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem once or twice. <sup>21</sup> But 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 lay hands on you.' From that time on they did not come on the sabbath. <sup>22</sup> And 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 favour, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

### Nehemiah 13:19-22

I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the sabbath. Nehemiah still has enough personal authority and resources to enforce his reforms, although it is not clear whether he is still governor at this point due to the time he had spent away in Persia.

I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates. Implicitly, through negligence, the gatekeeper Levites had been failing in their duties and needed to be ritually purified again for their task.

### VI.e. Nehemiah 13:23-31 - Mixed Marriages Condemned

Nehemiah then addressed the issue of those who were married to foreign women and were bringing up their children according to their own customs. Ignoring commitments like Sabbath keeping that should have sustained Israelite identity had led to intermarriage with persons of other religions. Nehemiah used the

example of Solomon, who had been brought into apostasy through his own marriages to foreign women of other faiths, as the example why the Jews should put aside their foreign wives. The son of the priest Eliashib was one such man and so Nehemiah had him excluded from the community.

<sup>23</sup> In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; <sup>24</sup> and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples. <sup>25</sup> And I contended with 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. <sup>26</sup> Did not King Solomon 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. <sup>27</sup> Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?'

#### Nehemiah 13:23-27

In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Ezra's measures in Ezra Chapters 9-10 apparently had little lasting effect. In the years Nehemiah was away the Israelites had resumed their practice of intermarrying with the pagan nations surrounding them. This was in dramatic disobedience to God's command. The real problem of mixed marriages is illustrated vividly here, as the children of these unions, in losing the language of Judah, were in effect losing their entire religious heritage.

And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. In his violent but symbolically powerful reaction, Nehemiah calls the people back to the Mosaic law, especially Deuteronomy 7:1-5, and points to the example of King Solomon, who was turned from faithfulness to the Lord by his foreign wives; refer to 1 Kings Chapter 11. If Solomon, one of the wisest and most blessed men ever, sinned with unwise and ungodly romance then no one else should consider themselves invulnerable. From this strong reaction of Nehemiah, it can be assumed that he considered this to be the most dangerous of their sins - pursuing ungodly romance, and getting involved in romantic relationships God had said 'no' to.

**When Ezra had first heard of mixed marriages he reacted: <<When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled>> (Ezra 9:3). Nehemiah's reaction was similar but different in**

that he pulled out the hair of the perpetrators. Such action might not be acceptable in church but it might have the desired effect!

<sup>28</sup> And one of the sons of Jehoiada, son of the high priest Eliashib, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; I chased him away from me.

<sup>29</sup> Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, the covenant of the priests and the Levites.

#### Nehemiah 13:28-29

And one of the sons of Jehoiada, son of the high priest Eliashib, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; I chased him away from me. The spiritual adulteration through intermarriage has even affected the family of the high priest Eliashib, who once more appears on the side of religious laxity.

Manasse, brother to Jaddus the next high priest of the Jews, having married the daughter of Sanballat the governor of the Province Beyond the River, gave instructions to build a temple on Mount Gerizim and then removed all the foreign gods to worship only God. It is uncertain whether this was a genuine attempt to bring faith in the true God to the Samaritans and other non-Jews living in the region at the time, or whether it was done purely for political reasons. It was clear that those involved were considered as opponents of Nehemiah and the work he was doing in Jerusalem around that time. According to Josephus, Manasse was the priest exiled in v.28 and that his father-in-law, Sanballat, built him the temple as a consolation.



The Temple on Mount Gerizim

**Remember them.** Nehemiah is asking God to deal with these people as he sees fit. Sometimes leaders have to deal with the people directly and sometimes they just have to leave it to the Lord. On judging others Paul makes the point: <<***But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me***>> (1 Corinthians 4:3-4). Jesus takes it further: <<***Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get***>> (Matthew 7:1-2).

**The covenant of the priesthood** is a reference to the special obligations laid on the priests and Levites, for the sake of the whole people; refer to 1 Samuel 2:27-36 and Malachi 2:4-9.

<sup>30</sup> Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; <sup>31</sup> and I provided for the wood-offering, at appointed times, and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

### **Nehemiah 13:30-31**

**Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign.** These verses highlight all that Nehemiah has done to ensure pure worship in the temple and to establish proper support for the priests.

**I provided for the wood-offering.** The wood-offering was referred to in Nehemiah 10:34. No specific law requires this tax, but the need for it is implied in Leviticus 6:12-13. It seems that Nehemiah may have made this provision, initially at least, from his own resources.

**Remember me.** At the end of it all, Nehemiah knew he had done his best to make the people of God strong, safe and secure. Beyond that, he also led them to be pure, worshipful and obedient. This prayer stands alone and may be taken as a general prayer that God should keep in view Nehemiah's entire work from start to finish when judging him.

**Remember me, O my God, for good.** Yet, Nehemiah certainly carried a sense of failure. In Nehemiah Chapter 10 the people made a solemn covenant with God that they would not do three things: have ungodly romantic relationships (Nehemiah 10:30), buy and sell on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 10:31), and support the work of God with money as he had commanded them (Nehemiah 10:32-39). Nevertheless, in this chapter, some 10 to 12 years later, Israel was steeped in the exact sins they vowed to stop. Nehemiah had to address the problems of ungodly romantic relationships (vv.23-31), buying and selling on the Sabbath (vv.15-22), and failing to support the work of God as he commanded (vv.10-14).

In Nehemiah 10:39b the people promised: <<*We will not neglect the house of our God*>>. But later in v.11 above, Nehemiah had to ask: <<*Why is the house of God forsaken?*>> It was forsaken because Israel did not keep its promises before God. This makes a point vividly clear: the law - that is, rules, vows, promises, covenants, and such like, are all ultimately powerless to stop sin. Only the grace of God, alive and flowing in believers' lives, can give them the power to truly overcome sin. Paul expresses this in Romans 8:3-4, among other places: <<*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*>>. Too many Christians look for victory in the making of rules, of vows, of promises - and fail to find it, because all those things tend to make them look to themselves, instead of looking to Jesus.

The OT history of Israel, from beginning to end, illustrates this. When the nation was first born at the Exodus, despite the most spectacular miracles, displays of God's glory, and revelation of the law, the people sinned, by crediting a gold calf with their deliverance from Egypt! And now here, at the end of the OT history of God's people in the Promised Land, Nehemiah is pulling hair out - his own and those of sinners - because they could not keep their promises to God.