

Nehemiah 13:4-31

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[0 : 00] Nehemiah 13 verses 4 through 31. For in the 32nd 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.

And I was very angry. I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. 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 frankincense.

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. 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. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses.

[1 : 24] Shalamiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Peraiah of the Levites. And as their assistant, Hanan the son of Zikor, son of Madaniah. For they were considered reliable.

And their duty was to distribute to their brothers. 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. 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 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 and Jerusalem itself.

Then I 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. 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.

[2 : 37] 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. 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 our 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?

[3 : 42] 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? And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashiv, 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 from them everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and the Levites, each in his work, and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times and for the firstfruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. And thanks, Marjorie, for reading today. I must confess that it's been rather difficult for me over these last few weeks to find myself absent from you on a Sunday morning.

And as your pastor, I have been already longing for the day when we can return and reconvene in one another's presence.

[5 : 04] And feel that God is winnowing us all in ways that will teach us things he has for this particular season.

I never would have guessed that on Palm Sunday we would find our way together in isolation, considering the entrance of Jesus into the city.

But as I've been feeding on this text this week, let me say this as we get underway. This is the first day of Holy Week.

It is the high water week of the Christian calendar. It commences with a celebration of Jesus and his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

It will conclude with his rising from the dead and his triumph over death and his reign now commenced on Easter morning.

[6 : 19] And yet, this year, God has a special plan for Holy Week and you. It is the first day of the Holy Week.

entering into his rightful domain and displacing all the ungodliness of our life that he might enter and reign.

It's a week of winnowing of his death and our dying in his death.

It's a displacement of unrighteous rule. It's a cleansing of the weed beds of sin that choke life from the Christian.

Interestingly, three of the four gospel accounts begin the last week of Christ's life through the event of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

[7 : 50] You can envision the city walls as we have been studying Nehemiah and the ancient walls. Topographically, Jerusalem is elevated.

And Jesus is arriving from below in humble station upon a colt. And the brick sun-soaked walls are before him.

And he enters underneath the stone archway as gates are opened. And a collection of people have been throwing palms before his cult and shouting, Hosanna, Hosanna.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. And interestingly, on that first poem Sunday, Jesus looked around at the condition of God's place, took note of the spiritual condition of God's people, and then departed only to return in what would begin the final week of his life.

And when he did return, three of the four gospel accounts indicate that he began through a cleansing of the temple, of a turning over of the furnishings, of a displacing of an unrighteous rule that had grown like barnacles on the bottom of a boat to God's very people.

[9 : 43] Palm Sunday is the event that signifies the displacement of unrighteousness within our life and a replacement of that with the very rule of Christ.

Now, when we thought about coming to the end of Nehemiah, it wasn't so well orchestrated as to know exactly how this text would fit with Christ's entry.

But I'm amazed as I look at the opening here. For centuries before Jesus' triumphal entry, Nehemiah made a re-entrance into the city of Jerusalem.

And like Jesus, he is foreshadowing this displacement of anything in God's house and anyone among God's people who would prevent God from ruling well in their midst.

You get the hints of that in verse 6 and following. It says, It is almost as though Nehemiah, long before Jesus, at his own entrance, not triumphantly in which he replaced all unrighteous rule, but tragically in which he is seeing his own reforms unfulfilled, reforms that would ultimately be fulfilled only by Jesus who would come centuries later.

[12 : 01] And so what we're seeing in this chapter highlights the truth that Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild a place may have been successful.

But his efforts to rebuild a people, well, that was a matter that was yet unfulfilled. What we see here is that he may have erected a home for God, but he didn't have the power to fully operate in the hearts of God's people to pull them from their coldness toward God.

What Nehemiah leaves unmet, Jesus on this very day will start to complete.

Let me just highlight three movements of this day in Nehemiah's life. If you look at verses 4 through 14, you see his concern for God's house, and I want to make a comment concerning that in our own ministry.

And then you're going to see concern for the Lord's day, verses 15 through 22. And I want to make some comments on our own use of the Lord's day and our own marketplace mentality.

[13 : 33] And then in verses 23 and following, you're going to see God's holiness in contrast to our misguided alliances.

For those of you who love literature, those three movements are pristinely set down by the final verse in each one.

They all close with Nehemiah verse 14 saying, Remember me, O my God, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God.

Or verse 22, and I hope you have your Bibles open and you're looking at it even now. Verse 22, Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

And then the final concluding verse of the entire book, verse 31, Remember me, O my God, for good. And so this text, commemorating Nehemiah's re-entrance into the city, not triumphantly, but in ways that show Israel's spiritual lethargy and the people of God's tragedy, is a foreshadowing of only what Christ will complete on the week that we have entered into.

[15 : 07] Let me just have you look for a few moments at that first movement. Nehemiah's concern for God's house and its relationship to our ministry.

verses 4 through 14. Tobiah, this one who is mentioned in verse 5, was introduced to us in chapter 2 as an Ammonite.

And in chapter 6, as one who was more than willing, having intermarried into God's family, more than willing to lead them spiritually in a way that would compromise their attentiveness to the law of Moses.

And here, as Nehemiah returns himself under the city gate, he discovers that Tobiah has been given quarters within the household of God.

Think of it. He labored 12 years to restore a place in which God's people would live righteously. And while leaving on a sabbatical of sorts, and upon his return, he immediately runs into a compromised clergy.

[16 : 31] Nehemiah's concern for God's house and its relationship to our ministry will have something to say about our future and a compromised clergy.

As we take vows soon to become Christ Church Chicago, one of the ways into lethargy will be the appointment of compromised clergy, men and pastors who invert their role, those who are willing to lead God's people into an easier path.

This one named Tobiah, if you look back in chapter 6, was an individual, verse 17, that many of the nobles of Judah were in league with.

In other words, there were prominent people who were in relationship with Tobiah and were fine in allowing him to undermine the ministry of Nehemiah.

This is nothing new. This is like Balaam before him or Korah in the wilderness. This is like Hermogenes and in Paul's letter, the church will continually be set by prominent ministers who are willing to lead God's people into an easier path and away from God's word.

[18 : 17] I can't think of anything more important for us as we think about our ministry and the recent appointment of men and women to the office of elder and deacon.

And you should know that Tobiah was well known within the community. I guarantee you, Tobiah was well liked within the community.

But the heart of Tobiah was willing to compromise on God's ways and to, in a licentious manner, allow God's people to live outside of their relationship to God's word.

I guess I'm telling you the importance of our future is to safeguard the character of our appointed leaders and any pastors among us who would stand for anything less than the truth.

The church over the centuries has gone awry through, at times, well-meaning, certainly well-liked ministers who abdicate on the gospel in hopes of gaining strength among a broader audience of people.

[19 : 46] On this Palm Sunday, as we think of Jesus entering the city and displacing an unrighteous rule, we have to guard the rule of our own home and, even more than that, the convictions of our own heart that we would live rightly before him.

His concern was for the household. And it not only related to a compromised clergy, it also related to an ungiving laity.

Take a look at verses 10 and following. He says, I also found that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers and those who did the work had fled each to his own home.

So I confronted the officials and said, why is the house of God forsaken? This is this is really an interesting moment in Israel's history.

Everyone had now fled from their collective engagement together in the presence of one another back into their own field and into their own home.

[21 : 04] And this retrenching to their own place had also covered a heart that they were no longer giving to the work that they had promised to support.

It wasn't long ago, it was chapter 10 where they had covenanted with their names in writing that they would give to the house and the work of the Lord.

In fact, six or seven times in chapter 10, there is a repetitive phrase that they will not neglect the house of the Lord. They're not going to neglect the house of the Lord.

But here, here they've arrived at a moment where they've all returned to their own home and the house of the Lord was forsaken.

That the resources that were needed for the work were now being withheld. I've been thinking about that on a number of fronts in these challenging times where we are now isolated and in an economic situation that is very different than the one a month or two ago.

[22 : 27] And I have some questions that I've just been wrestling through, questions that might be worth asking of you. To whom do we turn when we're looking for God's provision for his work?

Where do we look for the resources of his endeavor? all one has to do is look at the unemployment numbers that are emerging in our country and one knows that we are all retrenching and reconsidering what we need to do and how we need to move forward.

But this complete pulling back, this ungiving laity in a time of duress in union with a compromised clergy was a complete undoing of God's work in Nehemiah's day.

To put it differently, to what will we in an undeterred way continue to provide for in this meager day.

One of the things that's here is Nehemiah's line in verse 11 where he says, and I gathered them together and set them in their stations.

[24 : 09] Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. One of the most glorious moments in Nehemiah as it showed the heart of the people earlier was when they knew they were a few people, a weak people, and yet they were covenanting to labor in regard to the restoration of God's home and the welfare of God's people.

people. And for all of these things, they were lauded. They were giving to the work. And so I'm thinking of this in regard to just ourselves.

I'm thinking of it in regard to our first budget year, which if you're a member, you received this week our perspective needs for the family, the work of the Lord in our midst, and the need of faith amidst our family to provide for what we believe God is asking us to do.

You can't give what you don't have, but the heart can turn away from the Lord providing or from us giving at such a time as this.

I'm thinking of this even in regard to our commitment card Sunday, which was by God's providence delayed.

[25 : 58] but for how long should it be delayed? I've been wrestling with how long do we wait in the midst of a season of unknown capacity of isolation before we actually have the opportunity to joyfully, willingly, voluntarily commit to the work that we believe God has given us to do.

One of the things that Nehemiah does here is he gathers them together and they execute what they've been asked to do. I firmly think that you and I are living in this country and in a global commitment today, global situation today, that is testing the mettle of the members of God's family concerning his ongoing provision for the work that he's asked them to do.

And one of the things that this book finishes on is this decided, straight line of patient walking that in the midst of difficulty calls God's people to a full consideration of God's house.

May that be so for us. May we not neglect the household of God either by the appointment of an unrighteous and compromised clergy that would lead us astray over the decades or an ungiving laity that would neglect or forsake what he wants done.

Notice how he ends that, remember me oh God concerning this. In other words, the reforms that I would like to bring in the household of God, that it would be a place and a people that is actively engaged in the work of the kingdom.

[28 : 13] Lord, remember me for this even though you and I know that it would be impossible for that to be completed until Jesus himself would enter beginning even on this day.

God's house and our ministry. But in the text it gives way to the Lord's day and our marketplace. Look at verse 15 in those days I saw in Judah people treading the 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 loads which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day.

And Tyrians also, verse 16, who lived in the city brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath day to the people of Judah, notice the emphasis of the writer, in Jerusalem itself.

And this warning of Nehemiah then, that this, do you not remember that a disregard for the day of the Lord was actually an act of unbelief and a forsaking of the rest meant that you did not trust him for your own provision.

And the idea of turning the marketplace into a seven-day cycle, 24-7, seven days a week, was actually a disbelieving mentality that I can rest knowing that God himself will provide.

[29 : 56] This was the very problem in the wilderness where God's people are in the wilderness. Remember, he withheld abundance from them in food and provision, but he supplied for them their daily need.

Give us this day our daily need. He gave them manna from heaven and quail. But on the seventh day, on the Lord's day, that was withheld.

And so it was a test of one's faith, whether one would believe God will continue to provide in ways that allow me to rest, rather than to capitalize on every moment for the bringing in of work.

This is something that I think is related to us in regard to our own understanding of the day, the Lord's day, and our testing, again, of whether or not this day belongs to him, and we are willing to trust him with the provision of our life.

One day in seven to not chase it all, sell it all, garner it all, trade for it all. It does require faith.

[31 : 18] It does require trust that God will provide. Have we forgotten Deuteronomy chapter 8, where God's people were in the wilderness, wilderness, and he relates the manna to the bread of heaven, which is a test that you would know.

Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God. I mean, a similar time is upon us now as I watch people hoarding goods or taking for themselves what is needed in abundance without an understanding that we are a people who know how to rest and to give our attention to God, believing that he will provide.

I think even of our prayer meeting tonight, I think of this now in the midst of our third year of gathering regularly on the Lord's Day, the first Sunday of each month, to pray.

This is his day. It's his day from beginning to end. And I can't think of a better way to close this day, rather than just orchestrating all the work ahead of time for tomorrow, but to convene again in prayer and to call out to God in ways that enable us to trust him.

Nehemiah says, remember this also in my favor, verse 22, oh my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

[33 : 00] His household, God's household, ought to be our concern. His day ought to be honored in our lives.

And then finally, verses 23 to the end, his holiness ought to inform and alter our misguided alliances. Look at verse 23, in those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, 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.

evidently, the people of God were lax in regard to the alliances of their life.

And they began to wed those who were not of similar faith or conviction on the promises of Abraham. And so this people of God now began to marry and to raise families where the things of God were ever increasingly distant from the generations to where even the children are no longer even knowing the voice or the language of God's word because they've been enculturated completely.

Now what's interesting here is if you happen to be married to an unbeliever, it's, I love the fact here that he basically says, you know, you don't have to get out of that, we need to stop this where it is and not move on further.

[34 : 48] But also think of it if you're single, you know, half of our congregation is single. Who might you date and for what reasons? I have seen this aspect of chapter 13 work its way out now over 30 years of ministry.

I have seen young women who love the Lord over time fall in love with someone who's not a Christian.

I have counseled them why I feel they shouldn't get married. And notice in the text, the warning on the marriage is because he brings up Solomon, verse 26, did not Solomon, the king of Israel, sin on such an account.

As we are going to be Christ's church, there is something about the alliances of our life together that are even going to be evidenced in the marriages that take place, where they ought to be marriages of common faith in the Lord.

It's not that you can't love someone of a different faith. it's not that you can't overcome the complexities of the distinctions of your faith.

[36 : 09] No, these are not the reasons brought forth in the scriptures on why you marry in the faith. You marry in the faith because a one flesh relationship has such a magnetically charged aspect to it that like Solomon of old, it can pull you away from the faith.

Think of it even in regard to those who are already married in our church. Men, any unholy alliances, any union of flesh or mind, certainly of heart, that are distinct from the one that you have given your heart to, this is the day, this is the week, this is the hour to have done with any unholy alliances and to reconvene around the cross wherein there is grace and there is forgiveness but around a desire to lead and live a holy life.

it's interesting how the chapter moves from the concern for God's household and it ends up in your own home. Your home is the foundation of what will be the strength of our family of faith.

And if you are single, then you are to live in accord with holiness as the scriptures teach it. if you are married, we are to throw off all the things that would so easily entangle us.

For some, it will mean walking away from relationships but to the betterment and the spiritual health of your own soul.

[38 : 10] These are the ways that Nehemiah closes. Jesus enters into Jerusalem and he displaces all unrighteous rule that his people might live under his word.

And long before him, Nehemiah entered a second time into the city and his concern was for the purity of the household, for the generosity of the people, for their ability to rest and trust in the Lord concerning his day and a living in absolute purity with their body and their giving in marriage.

Certainly, Nehemiah closes with this phrase again, remember me. His reform was unfulfilled.

But of course, when you look at the New Testament, and I will close with this, in the book of Hebrews, there comes a time where the Holy Spirit bore witness saying, this is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord.

I will put my laws on their hearts and write them on their minds. And then he adds, I will remember their sins no more and their lawless deeds no more.

[39 : 39] For where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer offering for sin. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, let us do so as he is the great priest over the household of God, and let us draw near to him with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

as I leave today and we'll see each other tonight and then on Good Friday, may this be a week where we relinquish any and all unrighteous rule that has grown in our lives and reconstitute ourselves under the cross of Christ in whom our sins will not be counted against us.

What a phrase in Hebrews 10, I will remember their sins no more. Nehemiah, Lord, remember me, remember me, remember me, and in Christ you have been remembered, that your sins would be remembered no more.

Let me pray. Our Heavenly Father, we feel that you have shut us up into our own homes to deal with our own lives.

And we pray that we would be a city receptive to the entrance of your son and may it reorient our feelings for your household, our affections for your day, our alliances that we have made in our life.

[41 : 39] Lord, grant us repentance and have mercy even as we walk toward Good Friday. In Jesus' name, amen.

Tim, I'm going to