Nehemiah: The Work Before Us
WHEN WE DRIFT
Nehemiah 13
Sunday, November 15, 2026

Main Idea: Spiritual drift exposes the limits of our promises and reforms, but Jesus Christ offers the renewing grace our wandering hearts desperately need.

THE CURRENT WE DIDN'T NOTICE

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to go snorkeling in Cozumel, Mexico. If you've ever snorkeled in the Caribbean, you know how beautiful the water can be. You put on a mask, look beneath the surface, and discover an entirely different world. Colorful fish. Beautiful aquatic life. Things you don't ordinarily get to see. And that's what we were doing.

We had gone out a little way from where we started and were enjoying everything beneath the surface. The thing about snorkeling is that your attention is directed downward. You're watching the fish. You're looking at the beauty of God's creation. You're enjoying what you're doing. And that's where we made our mistake.

We became so focused on what we were looking at that we stopped paying attention to where we were. And all the while, the current was moving us. We didn't notice it happening. There wasn't a dramatic moment when we suddenly felt ourselves being swept away. We were simply enjoying ourselves. Until eventually, we looked up and we realized we were a long way from where we had started. A lot farther than we intended to be!

And I remember what it took to get back. We had to swim against the current. What had happened almost effortlessly now required tremendous effort. It was exhausting.

It took almost no effort to drift away. It took an enormous amount of effort to get back.

And here's what strikes me about that experience. We hadn't decided to leave our starting point behind.

We hadn't intentionally swum in the wrong direction. We had simply become so occupied with what was in front of us that we stopped paying attention to where we were.

Church family, I wonder how often something similar happens in our spiritual lives. Most people don't wake up one morning and announce, "Today, I'm going to drift away from the Lord." Instead, we become busy. Distracted. Comfortable.

We're working, raising families, managing responsibilities, and pursuing opportunities. Often, we're doing good things. But somewhere along the way, we stop paying attention to the most important thing. Prayer becomes less frequent. God's Word becomes less central. Worship becomes easier to miss. Little compromises become easier to justify. And because none of it seems particularly dramatic, we may not recognize how far we've moved.

Until one day, we look up. And we realize we're not where we used to be. Listen to this warning from Hebrews.

[READ HEBREWS 2:1–3 — ESV]

The writer tells us to pay much closer attention to what we've heard, lest we drift away. The Greek verb behind *drift away* carries the idea of slipping or flowing past. The image of a boat passing its harbor is often used to illustrate it. But notice something else.

Hebrews 2 begins with the word *therefore*. The writer has just spent the first chapter declaring the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He is God's Son, the radiance of His glory, the One through whom God has spoken, and the One who made purification for our sins.

This isn't merely a warning to be more disciplined. It's a warning not to neglect the glorious Savior who has been revealed to us. And that brings us back to the final chapter of Nehemiah.

For weeks, we've watched God accomplish remarkable things through His people. The walls were rebuilt. The gates were restored. The people heard the Word, confessed their sins, and renewed their commitments.

Last week, we watched two great choirs march along the rebuilt walls, celebrating God's faithfulness. But now Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, and something is terribly wrong. The walls are still standing. The gates are still hanging. The city still looks restored. But the people have wandered from the commitments they made. It prompts us to ask an important question.

What happens when the walls are still standing, but our hearts have wandered? Nehemiah 13 shows us that this kind of wandering rarely happens all at once; it begins when we gradually neglect the very commitments we once made before God.

1. SPIRITUAL DRIFT BEGINS WHEN WE NEGLECT WHAT WE ONCE PROMISED.

Remember what happened in chapter 10. The people made specific commitments before God. They pledged to honor His Word, guard their covenant faithfulness, observe the Sabbath, and support the worship of the Lord. They even concluded with a declaration that they would not neglect the house of their God. Those were serious promises.

But by chapter 13, many of those same commitments had been abandoned. Chapter thirteen doesn't describe one uninterrupted series of events. Nehemiah had returned to the Persian king and later came back to Jerusalem. During his absence, serious problems had developed. And what he discovered reveals just how vulnerable God's people are to drift.

A. What once would have been unthinkable had become acceptable.

[READ NEHEMIAH 13:4–9 — ESV]

Remember Tobiah? He's been one of the principal opponents of the rebuilding project. He mocked the workers, resisted Nehemiah's leadership, and worked against the restoration of Jerusalem. And now we discover that Eliashib the priest has provided Tobiah with a large chamber in the temple complex! Think about that.

A man who opposed the restoration of Jerusalem was given space in the very place dedicated to the worship of God. The room had previously been used for offerings and supplies connected to temple worship. Nehemiah returns, discovers what happened, and is furious. He throws Tobiah's belongings out, orders the chambers cleansed, and restores their proper use.

We should be careful here. This isn't an invitation to treat people we dislike as enemies who must be thrown out of the church. This is not that. This is about the corruption of something entrusted to God. A sacred responsibility had been compromised by a leader who should have guarded it. And here's the question that troubles me: How did something that should have been so obviously wrong become acceptable?

It probably didn't happen overnight. One compromise led to another, and over time, what once would have been unthinkable no longer seemed so troubling. **That's one of the great dangers of spiritual drift.**

Spiritual drift is dangerous because we can become comfortable with the distance. What once troubled our conscience can eventually become something we excuse. We make an exception. We rationalize a decision. We tell ourselves it isn't that serious. And if we're not careful, we begin defending things we once recognized as dangerous.

The question isn't simply whether we've committed some dramatic act of rebellion. It's whether we've slowly made room for something that is displacing our devotion to Christ.

B. What they promised to support, they began to neglect.

[READ NEHEMIAH 13:10–14 — ESV]

The Levites had not received the portions designated for their support, so they returned to their fields to provide for themselves. And Nehemiah asks the officials a piercing question: Why has the house of God been forsaken? Remember the promise in chapter 10?

They had specifically committed themselves not to neglect God's house. Yet here they are. The very thing they promised not to neglect had been neglected. I think this is where Hebrews 2 becomes especially helpful.

In verse 3, the writer asks how we will escape if we neglect such a great salvation. That word *neglect* is important. Not necessarily reject. Not necessarily renounce. Neglect.

John Piper once told a story about collecting coins with his father when he was growing up. His father traveled frequently, and when he returned home, they would examine coins together, look at dates and mint marks, and place them into those little blue collector's books. It was something they enjoyed together.

But Piper said something interesting happened. He couldn't remember when they stopped. They simply began doing it less often. Occasionally, they'd pull the books out, spend a little time with them, and put them away again. But the intervals grew longer.

Eventually, something that had once been important to them was simply forgotten. Nobody announced that coin collecting was worthless. They just stopped giving it attention. And that's how spiritual neglect can happen. There may be no announcement that we're abandoning the faith.

We simply stop giving attention to the things that once mattered deeply. And here's the danger:

We don't always stop believing something is important. Sometimes we simply stop treating it as important.

That is why Hebrews tells us to pay closer attention.

The people in Nehemiah's day hadn't merely forgotten a financial obligation. Their neglect revealed that worship was no longer occupying its rightful place in their shared life. And we need to ask ourselves whether the same thing can happen to us.

Have we become so occupied with everything else that our relationship with Christ receives whatever attention happens to be left over?

C. Their ordinary priorities began contradicting their public commitments.

[READ NEHEMIAH 13:15–22 — ESV]

Now Nehemiah discovers people conducting business on the Sabbath. Goods are being transported. Merchants are selling. Commerce is continuing as though the covenant commitments of chapter 10 had never been made. And Nehemiah confronts the leaders. He reminds them of the consequences of their ancestors' disobedience and takes steps to stop the Sabbath trade.

Now, Christians are not under Israel's Sabbath regulations in precisely the same way. We shouldn't turn this passage into a list of modern Sunday rules. But we should recognize the underlying issue. The people had promised to order their lives around God's Word. And now their daily practices were contradicting their public commitments. That's the real concern.

Are the commitments we confess still shaping the lives we live? It's possible to affirm the importance of prayer while rarely praying. It's possible to say Scripture is authoritative while allowing almost everything else to shape our thinking. It's possible to celebrate Christian community while gradually withdrawing from it. And it's possible to be very busy with church activities while giving little attention to Christ Himself.

Remember Cozumel? We weren't doing something terrible. We were enjoying something beautiful. But we were so focused on what was beneath the surface that we lost track of where we were.

Sometimes the things that distract us from Christ aren't necessarily bad things. They're good things that have quietly displaced the best thing. And if we don't pay attention, the current keeps moving us. But Nehemiah 13 doesn't end with neglected responsibilities. It exposes an even deeper problem.

2. LASTING RESTORATION REQUIRES MORE THAN EXTERNAL REFORM.

[READ NEHEMIAH 13:23–27 — ESV]

This is one of the most difficult portions of the book. Nehemiah discovers marriages that threaten the people's covenant faithfulness. He is especially troubled that some children are no longer speaking the language of Judah.

He remembers Solomon, whose relationships with foreign wives led him into idolatry. We need to be clear: the central biblical concern is not ethnic superiority or the idea that people of different nationalities should never marry. The concern is covenant loyalty and the spiritual direction of God's people. The Old Testament itself honors faithful foreigners such as Ruth, who embraced Israel's God.

Nehemiah responds with intense anger, including physical acts of discipline that the passage reports but does not authorize us to imitate. His concern is serious. But we must distinguish the enduring biblical call to faithfulness from the particular actions of an ancient governor. And as the chapter concludes, Nehemiah continues removing corrupting influences and restoring responsibilities connected to worship.

[READ NEHEMIAH 13:28–31 — ESV]

Notice how the book ends. Not with another choir or another dedication ceremony or with the declaration that everyone lived faithfully ever after. It ends with Nehemiah still confronting sin, still making reforms, and still praying for God to remember him. And that's a surprisingly sobering conclusion to a book about restoration. Because Nehemiah had accomplished remarkable things.

He had organized the rebuilding of the walls. He had confronted injustice. He had led courageously through opposition. He had called people back to the Word of God. But he couldn't permanently change their hearts.

They rebuilt the walls around Jerusalem, but they could not rebuild the hearts within it. And that reveals the limits of every human effort at restoration. We can change structures. We can establish policies. We can improve buildings. We can organize ministries. We can make sincere promises. And some of those things are very good and very necessary. But none of them can give a sinner a new heart.

That's a word our church needs to hear as we look toward the future. We have important work before us. We want to strengthen our ministries, care well for people, develop faithful leadership, address our properties and assets and prepare for the opportunities God may give us. We should pursue those responsibilities diligently.

But if we accomplish every organizational goal and neglect the spiritual health of our people, we will have missed the point.

A revitalized church needs more than renewed methods. It needs hearts continually renewed by God's grace. And that brings us to the great hope of the gospel. **The promise of a new heart**

Long before Nehemiah, God promised through the prophets that He would do something His people could never accomplish for themselves.

[READ JEREMIAH 31:31–34 — ESV, SELECTED VERSES]
31 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. 33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

God promised a new covenant. Not merely another set of promises written on a page, but His law written upon the hearts of His people. And through Ezekiel, God made an equally remarkable promise.

[READ EZEKIEL 36:26–27 — ESV]
31 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by

the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. ***33*** *For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.* ***34*** *And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*

God promised a new heart and His Spirit within His people. Do you see the difference? Nehemiah could command obedience. But God promised to transform the heart from which obedience flows. Nehemiah could remove Tobiah's possessions from the temple. But he could not remove sin from the human heart. Nehemiah could enforce the covenant's requirements. But he could not make his people permanently faithful. And that is why the story of Nehemiah ultimately points us beyond Nehemiah. It points us to Jesus Christ.

Nehemiah could restore a city. Jesus came to redeem a people.

Jesus lived the righteous life we have failed to live. He died on the cross for our sins. He rose again, victorious over death. And through His blood, He established the new covenant promised by the prophets. Our hope is not that we can finally make enough promises and keep every one of them perfectly. Our hope is that Jesus Christ has done for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Through repentance and faith in Him, sinners are forgiven, reconciled to God, and given new life. And by His Spirit, He continues the work of transforming His people.

That doesn't mean obedience no longer matters. It means obedience becomes the fruit of grace rather than the price we pay to obtain it.

Paying attention to Jesus

Now return with me to Hebrews 2. The writer warns us not to drift. But what does he tell us to do? Pay much closer attention to what we have heard. And what we've heard is the message of Jesus Christ.

The answer to spiritual drift is not simply to become busier with religious activity. It's to return our attention to the Savior. To listen to His Word. To draw near in prayer. To confess our sin. To encourage one another. To remain connected to the life of His people. And to keep looking to Jesus.

Hebrews 3 warns us about hearts hardened by sin's deceitfulness and calls us to encourage one another. Hebrews 4 invites us to draw near to the throne of grace. And Hebrews 12 calls us to look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. The warnings are serious because drifting is dangerous. But the invitation to draw near is real because Christ is gracious.

The answer to our wandering hearts is not merely greater effort. It is a greater Savior.

WHAT WE MUST NEVER NEGLECT

I want to return to something I mentioned earlier in the sermon. Remember John Piper's story about collecting coins with his father? Those little blue books they worked so hard to fill? The hours they spent together searching through coins, examining dates and mint marks, and celebrating whenever they found something they needed? Piper said that over time, they simply stopped paying attention to the collection.

They didn't decide the coins were worthless. They didn't intentionally throw them away. They just gradually stopped giving them attention. And here's the part of the story that strikes me. Piper said those coins would be worth thousands of dollars today.

But he has no idea where those books are. Think about that. Something that had real value. Something they had once treasured. Something they had invested time and attention into. And through years of neglect, they lost track of it altogether.

Church family, that's a sobering picture of spiritual drift. Not because our salvation is something we can accidentally misplace, like a collection of old coins. But because it's possible to become so distracted by the things of this world that we neglect the greatest treasure we've ever been offered.

And that's why the warning in Hebrews 2 is so serious. The writer doesn't ask how we will escape if we reject some minor religious obligation. He asks how we will escape if we neglect *such a great salvation*. Such a great salvation! The forgiveness of our sins. Reconciliation with the God who created us. The gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise of eternal life. All purchased for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How could we ever treat something so precious as though it were ordinary?

Have you considered where you are in your relationship with Christ?

Maybe there was a time when you were hungry for God's Word, faithful in prayer, and eager to gather with His people. But somewhere along the way, life became busy, your attention shifted, and you began to drift.

If that's you, hear this clearly: **Your salvation does not depend on your ability to hold on to Jesus, but on His faithfulness to hold on to you.**

Jesus promises in John 10 that His sheep will never perish and that no one can snatch them from His hand. Romans 8 reminds us that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ. But that assurance should never make us careless. It should draw us closer to the Savior who loves us.

And if you've never genuinely trusted Christ, don't mistake a past religious experience for salvation. Turn to Him today in repentance and faith.

But if you belong to Christ and recognize that you've wandered, come back to the One who has never stopped being faithful. Return to His Word, draw near in prayer, and walk with His people—not to earn back your salvation, but because you belong to Him.

And as we conclude this series, remember where we began. **In Nehemiah 1, the walls were broken, and Nehemiah wept. In Nehemiah 13, the walls were standing, but the people had wandered.** The walls

could be rebuilt with stones, timber, and hard work. But wandering hearts needed something Nehemiah could never provide.

A new heart. And that's what God has promised through Jesus Christ. Church family, we have work before us. Let's keep building, serving, loving, and faithfully carrying out the mission God has entrusted to us.

But let's never become so occupied with the work of the Lord that we neglect the Lord of the work. Because a church can have strong walls and wandering hearts. What we need most is not better buildings, stronger programs, or more ambitious plans.

We need Jesus Christ—the Savior who forgives our sins, the Shepherd who keeps His sheep, and the Lord who renews our hearts.

The work before us requires our faithfulness. The work within us requires His grace. And all the glory belongs to God.

Amen.