



# CANYON HILLS

COMMUNITY CHURCH

Series: Nehemiah

December 18, 2016

## **The Slippery Slope of Compromise**

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Let's open to Nehemiah, chapter 13. Let me just warn you. If you like happy endings, you're not going to like Nehemiah 13. If you're visiting with us today or you haven't been here for a while, we're working through Nehemiah verse by verse, through this precious Old Testament book. Let me recap, and then we'll wrap it up here in the next few minutes.

In chapters 1 and 2, if you remember, we find Nehemiah, who is Jewish, taking a leave of absence from his job (he was the cupbearer to a pagan king named Artaxerxes) when he found out that the city of Jerusalem, still, after almost 100 years, was in complete ruins, and the wall around the city was still destroyed, and God's people were still not finding any identity and nationality as they were coming back to their land.

So, Nehemiah asked the king, "Can I go and help rebuild the walls?" The king says yes. Archaeologists tell us that the wall Nehemiah was a part of rebuilding around the city was potentially 39 feet high. It was at least 8-13 feet thick, and they know it was close to 1,500 feet long. This wasn't a little retaining wall in your garden. It was a wall around a city on a hill.

In chapters 3-7, with the divine intervention of God, the wall is completed in a miraculous 52 days, but not without the relentless opposition of the surrounding enemies of the Jewish people. Two wicked men in particular, Sanballat and Tobiah, led the opposition. We'll get back to them in just a minute.

Then we got all the way to chapters 8 and 9. With the wall done, the Jewish people gather together in Jerusalem. For the first time in 110 years, they hear the law of Moses read. Ezra the priest gets out the scroll, and there they are, after being scattered, due to their sin and rebellion and God's punishment. They're back together. They're behind the safety of the wall, and the scroll comes out and Ezra reads the law of Moses, and it brings them under intense conviction for their sin. We read that they confessed their sin with godly sorrow and genuine repentance.

Then we got to chapter 10 and they made a recommitment to God. They made a new covenant with God to be faithful to trust God to bless them as they remained faithful, obedient, and

trusting in him to take care of them. Yet they also made a commitment to accept the punishment and the wrath of God if they should rebel again. Then all the priests of the Jewish people wrote this covenant out. They signed it on behalf of the people.

Then last week, when we got to chapters 11 and 12, the whole thing culminates in a worship celebration that was breathtaking in its scope, majesty, joy, and sincerity. Near the end of chapter 12 (we read this last week), Nehemiah wrote, **"And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away."** That's where we ended last week.

I envision Nehemiah looking at this massive throng of tens of thousands of people celebrating, crying, and worshipping. I can see him looking around and just saying, under his own breath, "My job is done here." I can see him just dropping the microphone. As he makes this 1,100-mile, 55-day donkey trip back to his work, where he came from, I can see him riding off into the sunset with a smile on his face, his heart full of joy as he has great hope for the people to live in the joy of God's loving protection, provision, and purpose for their lives.

That would have made a great ending, right? It would have. It would have been perfect, a perfect ending to an amazing story of the redemption of a rebellious people by a merciful God. You fast-forward a few years, we think, to chapter 13. There's some space between the end of 12 and the beginning of 13. No one really knows how long, but they can approximate it's at least a couple of years.

Nehemiah decides to go back to Jerusalem, check up on them, and see how it's going. When he gets there, it doesn't even closely resemble the people he left. It's part shocking. It's part sad. It's incredibly disappointing and even maddening. What in the world happened to cause the people to backslide in such a short amount of time, especially on the heels of 70 years of God's punishment for their previous rebellion?

How does this happen? I want us to see what happened, and then I want us to learn from it, because I think there are some real-time, modern-day things we can learn from and apply to our own faith as we try to love God with all our hearts. If your Bibles are open and ready, let's stand for the reading of his Word. We're going to read parts of chapter 13, not every bit of it, because there's a lot of it. We're going to pick it up in verse 4. We got through verse 3 last week, so let's pick it up right where we left off.

**"Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah..."** You remember that name. **"...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.**

**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 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, and 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 the 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." Let's go ahead and just skip to verse 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. Tyrians also, who lived in the city..."** By the way, they shouldn't have been living 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! Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day?'"** Scoot down to verse 23.

**"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..."** This is the understatement of the world, right here.

**"...and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair." Bring back that old-time religion, right? "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.'"**

Then he gives an example of when Solomon committed the same sin, and the destruction it brought upon him and the kingdom of God. Then there are some verses at the end that we'll save until the end. I want to just stop right there. Let me pray.

Father in heaven, before we even hear from you, I just pray especially for those in this room who are hurting today, whose Christmas this year is going to be different. God, you know all the circumstances as to why, and so I just ask that you would surprise those who are standing around us today, either sad, hurting, depressed, or down.

I just pray, God, that today would be the beginning of a new joy. I pray, God, that you will give them peace, knowing your plan and your purposes are good. Now we just invite the power of your Holy Spirit and the authority of your Word to speak to our hearts. God, show us what is going on here and how we can avoid it. In Christ's name, amen.

Heartbreaking, isn't it? We didn't even read all the verses, but like a dog returning to its vomit, they go right back into the same sins that had brought 70 years of God's wrath and judgment upon their lives. Had they already forgotten all the pain and all the suffering their rebellion against God brought them? Before I get into the application directly, there are two things that stand out.

First of all, Nehemiah stands out in this chapter. A lesser man would have gotten back to Jerusalem, saw what was going on, and just would have said, "I give up. I'm done with these people." If that's what we would have read in Nehemiah 13, I don't think we would have been very surprised, because we can relate to that, can't we? We've all felt that way.

We've all had that person in our life who just keeps making horrible choices, bringing destruction into their lives. They keep doing it. We have felt that in our hearts. Maybe we're the person who was making those kinds of choices, and we had someone finally come up to us and just say, "That's enough. I give up. I can't help you anymore." We get those feelings. We understand that.

Yet Nehemiah doesn't walk. That inspires me. It's one of the hazards of leadership, I suppose. Whether you're a leader at work, or you're a leader in your own home, or wherever you may be, we have to deal with a lot of complicated and sometimes sad and serious real-life problems, don't we? We can't ignore them. We can't just walk away from all of them. Nehemiah, driven by an intense desire to please the Lord, is going to deal with four very serious problems.

The second thing I'm struck with is the people. They're backsliding big time, one temptation, one compromise at a time. It didn't all happen overnight. I have to say to you that I relate to this. I relate to it in the sense that every single day we live on this fallen planet, we're in a battle. I'm in a battle between my spirit that is willing and my flesh that is weak.

I don't know if any of you can relate to that. I'm hoping some of you men can, but that's the reality. Until we get to heaven and we're completely delivered from our not-yet-totally-sanctified parts, we're in a war. The Bible tells us we're in a war against Satan, whose only mission is to steal our joy, kill our peace, and destroy our faith and hope in God. That's the real Enemy, and that Enemy poses, as we saw last week, a relentless onslaught of temptations and tricks to get us to walk away from God.

What we see here is a very predictable pattern of compromise that will cause any of us to backslide. It's a very slippery slope. I know my title isn't all that creative. I've never won any creativity awards for that. Yet the slope of compromise in our faith is very slippery, and the mile markers are very consistent. That's what I'm going to call my points here: these mile markers down the slippery slope of compromise as believers. Let's see if we can just see them together.

1. *They started hanging out with God's enemies.* I think most backsliding starts at or near this mile marker. Chuck Swindoll calls it a *compromising companionship*. We see here in verse 4,

Eliashib the priest empties out a few storerooms in the temple courts, turning them into a private hotel suite for Tobiah, of all people. On a million levels, this is wrong for this priest to do.

First, for years, Tobiah was an archenemy of Nehemiah and the Jewish people while they were building the wall. He intimidated them and threatened to destroy the people and to kill them if they didn't stop building the wall. In fact, I want you to see it for yourself. Leave a little mark there in chapter 13, but look back at chapter 4. Just go to Nehemiah, chapter 4, for a minute, to be reminded of who this Tobiah character is. Verse 1:

**"Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice [in their temple]? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?'"**

Verse 3: **"Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, 'Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!'"** Scoot down to verse 7. **"But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it."**

That's Tobiah. Not only does Eliashib the priest let Tobiah move into the city after Nehemiah goes back home, he lets him move into the sacred walls of the temple! Get your mind wrapped around this for a minute. Do you know what this would be like today? It would be like if you came into church this morning and you noticed on all the doors you were walking through, the signs that tell you where you're walking, and on the direction signs in the lobby pointing to where all the different rooms and spaces are...

Imagine you walked in this morning and there was a directional sign in our lobby that said, "Planned Parenthood, that way," "Racist Group meets this morning, this way," or, "Atheists Unite, come over here. We're going to meet around the fireplace." What if you came and you found out we had donated some of our office space to those groups?

You'd be confused. You'd be angry. You'd go back out and look at the sign. You'd turn to someone you came with and go, "I don't know what in the world that is." You'd be shocked! This is how Nehemiah was when he walked into the temple. He's not sure when the priests did all this, but we do know it was the beginning of a massive decline in the spiritual life of the people.

James, chapter 4, tells us, **"...whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."** You might be thinking right now, "But, Steve, doesn't Jesus teach us to love our enemies?" Yes. "Steve, doesn't he teach us to pray for our enemies?" Yeah. You might be thinking, "And doesn't he call us to take the gospel to the ends of the world, even parts of the world that are our enemies?" Yes, yes, and yes, but nowhere are we ever encouraged or expected to adopt our enemies as our close companions on any level.

This is a recipe for compromising our faith. Proverbs 24:1-2 says, "**Be not envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them, for their hearts devise violence, and their lips talk of trouble.**" The one we're all most familiar with is 1 Corinthians 15, where it says, "**Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals.**" Tobiah represented all that was bad company, and Nehemiah evicts him and all of his stuff out of the temple.

Imagine: Tobiah comes home that day, only to find all of his clothes, his furniture, his laptop, and his golf clubs all strewn all over the back alley behind the temple and his little apartment is completely cleaned out. It was a complete and total cleansing of everything Tobiah had touched. Even the smell of his cheap cologne was eliminated.

Nehemiah's response was godly, it was swift, and it was decisive. Church, this is a picture of exactly what Jesus meant when he said in the New Testament, "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." The reason Jesus said that is because we are, as children of God and born-again believers, living temples of God, where God resides in us in the presence of his Holy Spirit. This is how we are to drive sin out of our hearts. Through repentance, all of our sin is cleansed and removed.

J.C. Ryle, one of my favorite preachers of the seventeenth century, said, "...if you and sin are friends, you and God are not yet reconciled." Wow! You see, when we serve our sin an eviction notice and we kick it out of our hearts by repentance, the blood of Jesus Christ is applied to our hearts by faith, and even the smell of our sin is removed and replaced with the graces of God's Holy Spirit for every good work.

I guess the question we should ask is...*Have we, or are we, letting the enemies of God move in a little too close to our lives?* Are we partnering in business with someone who rejects Jesus? Are we going on vacations all the time with people who have only one thing on their mind, and it's not Jesus? Do we have a roommate...? Are we hanging out after work or on business trips with moral or religious enemies of God?

I'm not saying we are called to avoid all contact with unbelievers. That is not the principle here at all. We are called to go into the world. I'm talking about joining our lives together in companionship with this person, the enemy of God. This is the first mile marker leading down the slippery slope of compromise. As soon as we get on the slope through that, the next thing happens pretty quickly.

2. *They stopped supporting the work of the church.* We read a little bit of it here, but in verses 10-11, he says, "**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 [of the ministry], had fled each to his field. So I confronted the officials and said, 'Why is the house of God forsaken?'**" This compromise follows very naturally after the first one.

Eliashib had emptied out the storerooms in the temple that were meant to store the people's tithes and offerings. In the law of Moses, these tithes and offerings were commanded by God to

support the ministries and ministers of the temple and their religious life as a nation. The priests, the singers, and the Levites... All these people were the ones who would carry out and lead the people in their religious life and relationship to their God.

With no tithes in the storehouse, nothing was distributed, and the ministers, the priests, had to leave in order to find food and to feed themselves, he says here. They had to go. Nehemiah confronts it head-on. In verse 13, you read that he puts trustworthy people in place to receive and manage the offerings, and he calls the ministers and the priests to come back to Jerusalem and to the temple. Then, he demands the officials and the people to begin bringing their tithes and offerings back again.

Once the people saw what Eliashib the priest was doing, they just stopped giving. They stopped supporting the ministry of the temple. I think the lesson for us today is pretty obvious. When God's chosen servants of the gospel are not supported by the people, the people will have much to answer for, because when the ministers of the church are neglected the ministry of the Word is severely hindered, and that always leads to devastating compromise of the truth and of morals.

There's another spiritual principle here right beneath the surface. I think it's how Jesus would relate to this when he said, **"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."** What Nehemiah is showing and what Jesus is talking about is that there's a direct correlation between compromised giving and compromised living.

That's what Nehemiah saw had started to happen. In his attempt to lead the people off of this slippery slope of compromising their faith, he knew he had to call them back to a life of faithful giving and supporting God's work, because when we stop doing that, the third mile marker quickly approaches on the slope of compromise.

3. *They stopped going to church altogether.* It's the perfect flow. It's very predictable. Start hanging out with people who don't love God and who may even hate him. Your heart and your treasure begin to compromise in your priority of what's important, and eventually, you begin to just walk away from church, little by little, and altogether. That's exactly what happened.

Keeping the Lord's Day holy is a vital part of promoting true godliness in the lives of God's people, and breaking the Sabbath was a huge part of their previous rebellion, and it brought great damage to their spiritual, physical, and social lives. If you look at verses 17 and 18...

**"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.'"**

Then look at verse 22. **"Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy."** Remember, we read earlier that Saturday was just a big day of market. Everyone was working. Everyone was carrying on

like it was a regular workday, and it just blew Nehemiah away. How did they backslide to just ignoring the Sabbath?

You see, God set apart the weekly Sabbath for our joy, for our rest. This is what this is. This is for our joy and rest. It's to be a great day, used to recalibrate our hearts with thanksgiving, hope, and reminders that our God is good, he is great, and he loves us with an everlasting love, and yet when we make this day, this Sabbath, an option, when we make it a matter of convenience, we slip faster and a little deeper down the slope of spiritual decay.

Matthew Henry, one of the great Bible commentators, said, "Religion never prospers while sabbaths are trodden under foot." The slippery slide starts with keeping close companionship with people who want nothing to do with God. It quickly progresses to reallocating our treasure away from God and his work, and it goes toward ultimately eliminating corporate worship from our week. We make it an option instead of a necessity.

Then, by now, as we're sliding down the slope of compromise, our joy is dwindling. Our peace is shrinking. Our shame is increasing, and sin continues to look shinier and shinier as our hearts grow dimmer and dimmer. It's very clear, this progression of compromise, one compromise at a time. By the time we get to the next mile marker, we're setting ourselves up for a spiritual car wreck.

4. *They began to date and marry unbelievers.* Verses 23 and 24 are heartbreaking. He saw the Jews marrying women from these other countries. Then, in verses 24 and 25, "**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 God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons [and vice versa]...'"**

This was the nail in the coffin of compromise: intermarrying with pagan people, resulting in mixing their languages and their beliefs. Now he shows up a few years later and they're raising a generation of people who can't even speak the language of the Jews. They couldn't understand the Word of God, they couldn't hear the Word of God, and they couldn't read the Word of God, which would ultimately lead to wiping out Israel's ability to hear the voice of the Lord.

That's why, in 2 Corinthians, we are warned very graphically, "**Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?**" A little later, in the same passage, "**...or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?**" To take the heart of a person who has been called, sanctified, redeemed, and justified by the blood of God's very own Son and then give that heart in holy matrimony to a person who rejects the crucified Savior...?

This mile marker is very predictable once the first three are past. Nehemiah, as we read, goes postal on these people. For him, the greater the sin, the greater was the intensity of his response. It's a similar rage to what we see with Jesus when he walked into the temple and saw the people



turning their church day into a flea market. He had had it, and tipped over the tables. You know the story.

Let me be clear. I am not talking about or trying to apply this passage to people who are married to an unbeliever. You got married as unbelievers, and then one of you became a Christian. Scripture speaks very clearly to that in 1 Corinthians 7. That is a mighty miracle of mercy, potentially, to your spouse and to your children. As God calls you, he is going to use you and shine through you to show your family what it's like to be forgiven and loved by God. That is a beautiful thing.

That is not what I'm referring to here. That's not the application of this at all. Don't you dare give up on your spouse or your children who aren't yet believers. I'm talking about those of us in this room who are clearly Christ-followers, and we're already considering, dating, or marrying an unbeliever. You are headed into a dark season of compromise and pain, as illustrated by Nehemiah's intensity to roll back what they were doing. Listen to me. It is one thing to be single and lonely, but it's an entirely different level of loneliness to be married and lonely.

This slide crashes at this point. I want you to see the end of the book. Go to verse 28. **"And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat..."** There's that other guy who, with Tobiah, harassing the Jewish people. **"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 them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and 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."** Period. End of story.

It's not the most satisfying of endings, but here's where I think we grow. You may see yourself at or passing one of these mile markers we talked about today. I want you to know there are devastating effects to all of these compromises, because they keep leading to the next. If you find yourself having to admit that yes, you're there right now, I want to call you to repent, to turn, to start, and to do the right thing. Come back to your first love. That is the beauty of the gospel.

When you are saved, you are forgiven. You have access to God through Christ now, and the Bible says, in Hebrews, we can approach him with confidence to find help, grace, and mercy in our time of need, and so I call you to return to your first love today. Get off that slippery slope. It is going to the bottom, and it's going there fast. You can step out right now and cleanse yourself. Start giving again. Start worshiping again. Don't make any provision to be partner with an unbeliever in matrimony. Come back to your first love.

Now, with all that said, I still have the question...*Why?* Why did the people do this? Why do they keep doing this? They're going to do it several more times before you get to the end of the Old Testament. Why? Trying to get behind the curtain a little bit, this is what I have for you. I think, at some point in their lives, the Jewish people forgot who they were. It's an identity crisis.

I think their relationship with God became so much about duty that they forgot all about the delight. It was such a burden. "Well, God has chosen us, so we just have to do all this stuff to make sure we don't get in trouble." Their motivation became just trying to kind of stay in on God's graces instead of their motivation being the joy of who they truly were. It's the same thing with us. We can do that, can't we? We could make our Christian life all about duty, and we lose the joy of our salvation.

I just made a list of part of our identity. We are children of God. We are supernaturally saved and adopted by God's grace through faith in Jesus. We are citizens of heaven already. God is our King. He has put his very own Spirit in us. We are forgiven. We are loved. We are promised an eternal inheritance, and we need to find our greatest joy, privilege, happiness, pride, and amazement in who we are in relationship to God. When that joy is there, when our identity is right, what we do becomes this celebration of who we are, not the opposite.

Father in heaven, I just pray for all those in this room right now who maybe sense that the joy of their salvation is much less than it once was or much less than it could be. I pray, God, that today, you would give them a vision, a glimmer of their true identity. I pray, God, that all their motivation for being faithful and obedient to you would come from a joy of knowing whose they are. I pray this in Christ's name, amen.

I want to just share with you that there are people standing up here right now whose greatest joy is to pray with those who want to give their hearts to Jesus or recommit their lives back to him. If you find yourself today saying, "I don't want to stay where I am. I want to take that next step toward Christ," they would love to pray with you and encourage you in that journey and give you something to go home with. I hope you'll do that before you go.

God bless you. The next time we're going to see each other is Christmas Eve. Saturday or Sunday, but not both. You got that message clear? All right. God bless you. We'll see you Christmas Eve.