

Nehemiah 9:38-13:31 How Quickly We Forget

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro
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This morning we're going to talk about relationships, money, and religion. Should be kind of interesting, huh?

We're also going to see a bunch of people who want to change, who *really* want to change, but who fail. Remember, in Chapter Nine they've been remembering how God has been so kind to them time and time again, and now they say, "We're not going to fail again. We're not going to blow it. We're going to change!" Let's see what they say, and then we'll see where it all goes:

Nehemiah 9:38 "And because of all this,
We make a sure *covenant* and write it;
Our leaders, our Levites, *and* our priests seal it."

10:1 Now those who placed *their* seal on *the document* were:

Nehemiah the governor, ... (8)...the priests. (9) The Levites...(14)...The leaders of the people:

So, the political, the religious, and the familial leaders of the people took charge – the leaders led, and they said, "This is what we're going to do!" And the rest of the people agreed:

28 Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding— 29 these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:

These guys were there with their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding. So, young men and young ladies, if you were alive 2500 years ago, you would have been there in Jerusalem with your moms and dads too. You have knowledge and understanding, right? One of the biggest complaints that youth have is that they want to be treated like an adult – well, here they were, acting, and being treated, as adults.

And they're all agreeing - "We'll take an oath, and may we be cursed if we don't do it."

Some of you remember trying to bargain like this with your parents, right? Mom, I swear, I'll do a good job. I swear I won't get in trouble. I promise, if you let me do X, then I'll (fill in the blank). Well, these Israelites are worked up like that. And here's what they're proposing to change – three things:

30 We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons;

First up, relationships – it's a topic that still hits pretty close to home today, huh?

How important is it to you that the person you're hoping to date, or are dating, agrees with you about God? Many people say it *should* be important, but I've seen WAY too many situations where spiritual matters take a back seat to things like how the person looks, or how much fun they are to be around.

But look, what you believe about God ought to influence what you believe about everything else in life. So, if the two of you don't agree on God, you might be able to get along – I mean, hopefully you have lots of friends and co-workers that you get along with who are not saved, but you won't make the same decisions about important issues. For example, what are you going to do on Sundays – is that just another day to go shopping, or go hiking, or pick up another shift, or is that a day set aside for worship?

You're going to have some very important issues that you will feel differently about. Oh, you'll be able to get along just fine most days, but the differences are there, and they'll start to pop up and make difficult situations even more difficult for you after a while. If you don't believe me, let me introduce you to men and women who have been through it already. The best thing you can do is date and marry another Christian.

31 if the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and we would forego the seventh year's *produce* and the exacting of every debt.

Next up – work and money. I never thought of this before, but I was reading something this week, and the author pointed out that only a free people could have a Sabbath. Slaves have to work whenever they're told. But free people can arrange their own schedule and take a day of rest.

Now think of that. Are you free? Can you take a day of rest? I mean real rest. Whatever that means to you. Can you take a day to do whatever you enjoy doing? Or are you a slave? A slave to school, a slave to money, a slave to your house, your errands, or your kid's activities? Or can you rest? Only a free man or woman can rest. And God wants to give you freedom in Christ. Most of what you and I are so busy doing has no eternal value. Remember – not all movement is progress.

Maybe you need to institute some sort of Sabbath in your life; think about, pray about it.

Change number three – we’re going to worship.

32 Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: 33 for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

They’re going to give the money that’s needed to keep the Temple going.

34 We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for bringing the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers’ houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as *it is* written in the Law.

They’re going to bring the wood necessary to keep the altars burning.

35 And *we made ordinances* to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD; 36 to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as *it is* written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God; 37 to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, *the* new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities. 38 And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms of the storehouse.

The shekels and the wood they mentioned at first are just to cover the operating expenses so to speak, now they’re going to bring sacrifices and offerings to worship God – putting Him first in every area of life.

39 For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary *are, where* the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers *are*; **and we will not neglect the house of our God.**

I love that last line – they realize they’ve been making a priority out of everything else in life and pushing God to the backseat, but now they make this commitment to change “**and we will not neglect the house of our God.**”

It’s awesome! And I think they meant it.

Have you had one of these moments in life? Where everything kind of came into perspective and you realized the need for change? I know I have, I’ve had several actually.

You see what's wrong and you see what needs to be done, now all that is left is to actually do it. And it looks like these Israelites are headed in a good direction. After all, wasn't it neglecting God that got them into their miserable position in the first place? And, hello, what about you and me? What tends to happen in our lives when we neglect God?

In Chapters Eleven and Twelve you see a lot of names of people and places, it's basically a census document that shows who was going to live in the newly re-established city. The walls had been rebuilt, but no one was actually living there yet. They needed people to move in, and they needed priests and Levites to be there to run the Temple each day, so these chapters tell you who did all of that. You can read it on your own, but I'm going to skip over it and jump down to 12:27 which picks up the last bit of the celebration we've been looking at.

27 Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, *with* cymbals and stringed instruments and harps. 28 And the sons of the singers gathered together from the countryside around Jerusalem,

These guys are going to be the worship team for a huge worship service that Nehemiah is preparing. Now that the walls of the city are built, he leads all the people up on top of the walls and they sing praises to God there. He talks about all the different people who were involved and says:

40 So the two thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God, likewise I and the half of the rulers with me; 41 and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Minjamin, Michaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, *and* Hananiah, with trumpets; 42 also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. The singers sang loudly with Jezrahiah the director.

43 Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.

Everybody was fired up! "*God had made them rejoice with great joy*" – even the sullen teenagers – "the women and the children also rejoiced." It was an awesome day – there was excitement and thanksgiving in the air as the people celebrated what God had done and they took steps to fulfill their vows.

44 And at the same time some were appointed over the rooms of the storehouse

This is a part of the Temple – they're talking here about how the people took care of the Temple and all stuff they were bringing in like they had promised:

for the offerings, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions specified by the Law for the priests and Levites; **for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered.**

They took care of their pastors and their worship leaders, and the ministers took care of them.

45 Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David *and* Solomon his son. 46 For in the days of David and Asaph of old *there were* chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. 47 In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, a portion for each day. They also consecrated *holy things* for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated *them* for the children of Aaron.

They were making a priority of worship, and that was leading into a godly view of the rest of life:

13: 1 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 come into the assembly of God, 2 because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3 So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.

Things are going well, they're separating themselves from bad influences.

But, as the years go by, they slowly begin to drift away from their original enthusiasm. Remember, they had sworn to fix their view of relationships, of work and money, and of worship? Well, watch what happens now. Years go by and we find a mess:

4 Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, *was allied with Tobiah.*

Tobiah is one of the bad guys who opposed rebuilding the walls. And one of the priests was doing favors for him.

5 And he had prepared for him a large room, where previously they had stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, the tithes of grain, the new wine and oil, which were commanded *to be given* to the Levites and singers and gatekeepers, and the offerings for the priests.

Uh-oh.

6 But during all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Then after certain days I obtained leave from the king, 7 and I came to Jerusalem and discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God.

So, while Nehemiah was out of town giving a report to the King, Tobiah took over a room in the Temple, a space that was supposed to be used for legitimate worship.

It didn't go over so well when Nehemiah found out:

8 And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room. 9 Then I commanded them to cleanse the rooms; and I brought back into them the articles of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

How had this happened? Well, apparently the people had begun to 'neglect the house of their God' the thing they swore they would not do.

10 I also realized that the portions for the Levites had not been given *them*; for each of the Levites and the singers who did the work had gone back to his field. 11 So I contended with the rulers, and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their place. 12 Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse. 13 And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouse Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah; and next to them *was* Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and their task *was* to distribute to their brethren.

14 Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its services!

They had drifted away from worship. Wanna guess what else they had drifted away from?

15 In those days I saw *people* in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all *kinds of* burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned *them* about the day on which they were selling provisions. 16 Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold *them* on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing *is* this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

19 So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted *some* of my servants at the gates, *so that* no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day. 20 Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice.

21 Then I warned them, and said to them, "Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do *so* again, I will lay hands on you!" From that time on they came no

more on the Sabbath. 22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!

They had gone back to their old views on work and money. So, it really shouldn't surprise you to see:

23 In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people.

25 So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. 26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin. 27 Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?" 28 And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I drove him from me.

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

30 Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service, 31 and to bringing the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times.

Remember me, O my God, for good!

They had gone back to their old views on relationships and started dating and marrying whomever they wanted. And that's the end of the book.

So, what happened? Where did all that enthusiasm for God and change go? Well, look at the order of events. First they had drifted in their view of worship, and then they drifted in the rest of life.

If you don't have a proper view of worship, you can't have a proper view of anything else because nothing else will make sense. Why would you say no to the desires of your flesh – the desire to be with him or her, or the desire to work a little harder to gain a little more if your desires weren't being satisfied anywhere else?

But that's what God is offering you – He's saying, don't look to all those other things for joy, or for approval, or for acceptance, look to Me. If you have the right view of God, then you realize you don't need as much of all the other stuff. Is there anything that you really need that God cannot provide? If so, you probably have a warped view of God and/or of your needs. Go back and look at Chapter Nine, reflect on all that He had done for these people, look back on your own life and think of all the goodness He has shown you.

Romans 8:31 What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can be* against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

We're going to celebrate communion now this morning – it's a reminder, we're told to do it in remembrance of Him – to remember that we don't have to go chasing after fulfillment in relationships or in stuff because He has given Himself completely to us.

This is where you find the strength to change in your life – it's not just by making up your mind to be better, or different – it's by remembering who God is and what He has done for you. If you lose sight of worship, you'll soon lose sight of everything else as well.

So, I'd like to invite the worship team to come up and for the ushers to come forward and as they pass out the elements of communion I want you to ask yourself, and to ask God – how are you doing? How is your view of Him? How are your priorities? Is there anything that needs to change? And, if you find yourself drifting from where you know you ought to be, or perhaps drifting from the changes you've sworn you would make – would you ask Him to forgive you, and to correct your view of Him – ask Him to fix your view of worship and to allow that to affect everything else.