

June 22, 2025

Nehemiah 13:1-31

On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God,² for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing.³ As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.⁴ Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah,⁵ 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.⁶ 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 king⁷ 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.⁸ And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.¹³ And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers.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 his service.

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.¹⁶ 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, in Jerusalem itself!¹⁷ Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day?¹⁸ Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster¹⁹ on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.”¹⁹ 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. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day.²⁰ Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.²⁶ Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.²⁷ Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?”²⁸ And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me.²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.³⁰ Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work;³¹ and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

Scriptures for further study:

Deuteronomy 23:3-6

1 John 1:8-10

1 Thessalonians 5:24

“He [Tobiah] had usurped a room set apart for holy use for his own personal self-aggrandizement... flagrant abuse of personal privilege and at worst a blasphemous disregard for the holiness of God himself.”

-Derek Thomas

“Nehemiah, like almost all other Biblical characters, has feet of clay. Only Jesus is sinless... Jesus, by contrast, was obedient right up to the point of death (Phil.2:8). The One who sits on the throne is called “Faithful and True” (Rev.19:11). We are prone to wander and stray; he is the Rock.”

- Derek Thomas



The Hand of God and Our Need for Ongoing Renewal Nehemiah 13:1-31

BIG IDEA: Since the Hand of God is faithful and ever-present, we can freely repent of our sinful ways and take refuge in the Faithful One.

OUTLINE

1. Broken Promises

2. Faithful Reforms

3. The Faithful One

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These “Sermon Discussion Questions” are designed for study during the week for believers in a wide variety of ages & stages in their walk with Christ.

1. Do you enjoy stories that end happily? Or do you prefer some stories to end in a sad way? Why or why not?
2. What was your reaction to the way that Nehemiah ended? Why?
3. In Nehemiah 13, what are the four ways that Nehemiah found that the Israelites broke God’s Law?
4. How did Nehemiah react to the covenant breaking, and how did he lead the Israelites back to follow God’s ways?
5. What does the Bible teach us about our ongoing struggle with sin and our new life in Christ? What are some of the tools or items that God provides for us in our Christian journey of faith?

“When you are confronted in your sin, convicted, and brought to repentance, it is because God has shown you merciful love.”

- James Hamilton

“The Book of Nehemiah begins with prayer and closes with prayer.”

- Mervin Breneman

“Whatever the question, God has provided the answer in the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).”

- Alan Wright

Praise to Jesus. Praise our promise-keeping God! For all the promises of God find their yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our amen to God for his glory. 2 Corinthians 1:20 Though we have broken promises and sinned against God, he will never break his promises to us.

Repentance through Jesus. Confess and repent for the promises that you have made and broken. As you receive God's forgiveness assured to you in 1 John 1:9, consider if you need to ask forgiveness for broken promises to family, friends, coworkers, or neighbors.

Consecration to Jesus. Since the Hand of God is faithful and ever-present, we freely repent of our sinful ways, take refuge in the Faithful One, and proclaim the hope and help that we have from Jesus to everyone we meet!

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After a transition (12:44–13:3) showing the people's trusting obedience to God's law, the remaining verses (13:4–31) make a dramatic contrast, as the people disobey the law in Nehemiah's absence. Each promise from chapter 10 is broken: regarding the temple (vv. 7–13; see 10:32–39), the Sabbath (13:15–22; see 10:31), and marriage (13:23–27; see 10:30; see also Ezra 9–10 and notes).

This book thus lowers a dark final curtain at the onset of that intertestamental waiting period, before the promised "light of life" comes to shine in the darkness (John 1:4–5). In Scripture's full light, it is clear that only the one who is himself the temple can make these wrongs right (John 2:18–22). Nehemiah's interspersed prayers offer a thread of hope, asking God to "remember" (Neh. 13:14, 22, 29, 31)—both the good and the evil, all of which God will bring to light. The greatest hope comes in Nehemiah's final claiming of "the greatness of your steadfast love" (v. 22), God's covenant love for his people that culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In reading the book of Nehemiah, we too are brought to reflect on the greatness of God's steadfast love, which for us has been decisively secured in Jesus on our behalf. We have been adopted into God's family. We are no longer orphans. Let us lift our heads and rejoice.

-ESV Gospel Transformation Study Bible

FOR FAMILIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN

These questions are written to aid parents in leading family devotions with their children.

1. What are your favorite stories? Do they have happy endings, sad endings, or mixed endings?
2. What type of ending does the book of Nehemiah have?
3. Read Nehemiah 10:28-39 and the commitments that the Israelites made. Compare those commitments to the unrighteous ways that Nehemiah discovered when he returned to Israel. (Chapter 10 ends with the Jews committing to not “neglect the house of our God. But now the Jews have allowed Tobiah, one of the main enemies, to have a room in the Temple. The Israelites have neglected the care for and the provision of the Levites. They have neglected the gift of the Sabbath. And the Israelites have married unbelievers, and that has led to their unfaithfulness in many matters.)
4. How does the Bible describe our Christian life? What does the Lord give to us to support us in our Christian life? (Talk with your children about the Christian life and our struggle with sin. Make sure to tell them that because of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension, then we as Christians are assured of victory. The issue for us comes due to God’s timing and ways being higher than ours. We get impatient and believe the lies of the Enemy that God has left us on our own. God has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace (Reading & studying God’s Word, prayer, worship, sacraments, and Christian fellowship) to aid us in our Christian life.

Scriptures for further study:

1 John 1:8-10

Hebrews 4:14-16

Romans 2:4

FOR STUDENTS

Scriptures for further study:

1 John 1:8-10

Hebrews 12:1-11

Deuteronomy 23:3-6

Lamentation 3:22-23

2 Timothy 2:13

Colossians 2:6-7

Philippians 2:8-11

1. The book of Nehemiah doesn't end with a clean, happy conclusion—instead, it shows people breaking promises and falling back into sin. How did that make you feel? Why do you think God included this kind of ending in Scripture?

2. What were some of the specific ways the Israelites broke their covenant with God in Nehemiah 13 (ex, relationships, Sabbath, temple neglect)? Why do you think they drifted away so quickly?

3. Nehemiah responds with strong leadership and corrective action (vv. 8, 11, 15, 25). Do you think his reactions were harsh or necessary? How does this passage challenge our view of sin, repentance, and God's holiness?

4. Nehemiah repeatedly prays, "Remember me, O my God" (vv. 14, 22, 31). What do you think motivated him to say that? If you were to pray that same prayer, what would you want God to remember about your life?

5. Why do you think ongoing renewal is necessary in the Christian life? What are some daily or weekly practices that help you stay close to God and walk in obedience?

6. What is one area of your life where you've felt conviction or drifted from God's ways? How might God be calling you to repentance and renewal this week?

FOR SEEKERS AND NEW BELIEVERS

1. Based on Chapters 1-12, we might have expected Chapter 13 to conclude the whole saga with the words, “And they lived happily ever after.” Clearly, this is not the case! In the twelve years since Nehemiah left Jerusalem and returned to Babylon, things have devolved considerably.

QUESTION: What does this teach us about ourselves as God’s people?

QUESTION: While the obvious answer is sin, what other factors led to the spiritual compromise of God’s people?

QUESTION: How does reading this depressing final chapter actually create a deep longing in us for a more complete and ultimate fulfillment of God’s purposes, a feeling that things are unfinished until there is a new leader (Jesus), a new covenant, and a new Jerusalem one day?!

2. Nehemiah is sometimes criticized for his seemingly harsh actions here.

QUESTION: Righteous anger is permissible at times. (See John 2:14-16) Is Nehemiah demonstrating this kind of righteous anger here?

QUESTION: Is it possible that it isn’t so much that Nehemiah is overreacting so much as we today have lost a sense of the holiness of God?

QUESTION: Is it possible that it isn’t so much that Nehemiah was harsh in his discipline of others, so much as we today have grown accustomed to excusing immoral behavior and have therefore neglected discipline in the modern church?

3. Several times, Nehemiah says to God, “Remember me.” (see vv.14, 22, 31)

QUESTION: It is clear that Nehemiah does everything with a desire to be faithful to the covenant and a desire to always seek the Lord’s favor and promote God’s glory. Is this the same motive that drives everything we do? At the end of the day, what would you want God (and others) to remember about you?

4. Due to the natural drift of the heart to carelessness and compromise, the people of God are always in need of examination and reformation.

QUESTION: In what ways do you think your church can be better aligned with God’s will and purposes?

QUESTION: In what ways and in what areas of your life do you believe God wants you to make needed spiritual reforms? Will you ask for his grace to help strengthen you?



The Ancient of Days, William Blake, 1794.

About the artwork and artist.

The Ancient of Days, found in prophecies of Daniel, is the subject of William Blake's engraving in which he shows us the Hand of Our God and His Divine Sovereignty in the Return and Renewal of God's People, the sermon series title for Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Ancient of Days is the cover art for Blake's Poem Europe: a Prophecy (1794). The Ancient of Days is a name for God the Father, whom the prophet Daniel spoke of in Daniel 7, where he saw Jesus, the Son of Man, "given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

Blake's poem "Europe", depicts a world filled with suffering based on the political climate of Europe and politics in England in the 1790s. It is appropriate in light of the suffering of God's people described in Ezra and Nehemiah. The artwork by Blake serves to remind and encourage God's people to know that He is still active and on the move with His plan of redemption despite their surroundings and circumstances. William Blake (1757-1827) was committed to connecting the prophecies and visions of the God of the Bible with the events in his country; the poet, printmaker, and painter was unrecognized and died impoverished. Despite their circumstances, William and his devoted wife Catherine, whom he taught to read and write, enjoyed a happy marriage and life together.

Today, William Blake is considered one of the greatest poets in the English language and one of the most original visual artists of his day.

Barker, (2004) (Barker, William Blake 1757-1827, 2004)

Introduction to Nehemiah

From January to May 2024, we heard sermons from the Book of Ezra. The introduction to Ezra, recorded sermons, and discipleship resources can be found on our church website at this address; <https://www.fpcrome.org/pdd-ezra/>

Ezra and Nehemiah were, for centuries, received as one book narrating the return of God's exiled people to their land, as under Persian rule they were allowed to resettle and rebuild Jerusalem. These two books cover three different waves of returning exiles, from 538 to 433 BC. But they tell one story: the restoration of God's covenant people according to his Word—which they are now called afresh to obey.

This restoration required, first of all, the rebuilding of the temple and the reinstitution of ceremonial worship. The first leader, Zerubbabel, led the initial wave of exiles back to Jerusalem to accomplish this goal (Ezra 1–6). The second wave came more than half a century later, led by Ezra, who rebuilt not the temple but the people, teaching them—and calling them to obey—the law of Moses (Ezra 7–10).

Thirteen years after Ezra arrived, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem. He first led the people to rebuild the wall (Nehemiah 1–6). Then, along with Ezra, he sought to restore the people (Nehemiah 7–13) as God's holy nation, followers of his Word.

The restoration was not complete, however. These books picture God's people regathered but struggling; they are poor subjects of a foreign king; their city is devastated; enemies oppress from without; sin threatens from within. We see the faithful hand of God mercifully preserving his people according to his promises. We also see the dire need for the perfect fulfillment of God's promises in the salvation accomplished by his Son. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible.)