

Nehemiah 13:1-13

For 12 years Nehemiah served as governor of Judah (from Artaxerxes' 20th year to his 32nd year). When the 12 years were up, Nehemiah returned to Persia evidently once again to serve King Artaxerxes (2:6). How long he remained away in this position is not known – somewhere between 2 and 12 years. While he was gone some rather startling changes took place in Judah, changes involving serious violations of the Mosaic Law. When Nehemiah once again returned to Judah, he faced a task that in some respects must have been even more difficult than rebuilding the wall.¹

NOTE: "On that day" (v. 1) refers not to 12:44 but to the time after Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to be governor again, as indicated in vv. 4–7. The portion of the Law (the Book of Moses) that was read (v. 2) is Deuteronomy 23:3–5.²

As the people drew near to God in worship and read the word of God, which judgment of God were they reminded of (vv. 1-2)? The Ammonites and Moabites were not to be admitted into the Assembly of God.

Why not? What did they do (vv. 1-2)? According to Deuteronomy 23:3–5, the Ammonites and Moabites had resisted Israel's march to the Promised Land, and the Moabites had even hired Balaam to curse Israel but God ... turned that attempted curse into a blessing (Numbers 22–25). Therefore Ammonites and Moabites were to have no part in Israel's temple worship.

The point is -- God held them accountable. They were singled out because of their schemes against Israel when Israel came into the Promised Land - at least a thousand years before this. God did not forget.

Does that apply to today? Will God hold people accountable for oppressing Israel today?

What was the response of the people to the reading of the Word of God (v. 3)? They separated from Israel all foreigners -- they could not participate in the temple worship, i.e. in the spiritual life of God's people (v. 1). The Israelites could have thought of many reasons to not do what the word of God plainly told them to do. They didn't say, "That command was made long ago, and speaks to a different time." They didn't say, "Our culture is different." They didn't make excuses; instead, they simply obeyed. Interestingly once again the reading of God's Word had a real life effect on the people (cf. 8:1–6, 13–17; 9:3)³ which is an indication of the condition of their hearts.

What happened in Jerusalem during Nehemiah's absence (vv. 4-6)? When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he was shocked to find that Eliashib, the high priest in Judah had prepared a large room in the temple for Tobiah. Eliashib and Tobiah were closely associated, which may be due to family ties (cf. Tobiah's relationships by marriage with several Jews - 6:17–18). Tobiah had been an enemy of Nehemiah, opposing the wall-building but now that Nehemiah was gone, Tobiah the Ammonite moved into the temple! The room he occupied had been one of the temple storerooms -- a side room for storing grain offerings. There Tobiah could undermine God's work while looking like he was helping it!⁴

In the previous chapters we have seen instances of spiritual revival and commitment. Now, several years later, it's a mess. How/why could something like this happen? What does that say about revival? Long term, man cannot maintain his own sinless/holy state without help. Best intentions without the power to change are worthless (Acts 1:8).

Nehemiah left and things went bad. Does that remind you of another Old Testament scene? When Moses left to go up to the mountain, after 40 days, the people fashioned the golden calf to worship.

Why was Eliashib's act sinful (vv. 4-5)? He was compromising with the enemy entering into agreements with one of the enemies of Nehemiah's work of rebuilding the wall. Rooms in the courts of the temple of God were being occupied by a man who was not only a pagan, but who also had a history of actively opposing God's work in the days of Nehemiah.

Where was Nehemiah while all this was going on (v. 6)? Nehemiah had returned to Artaxerxes. Several years later, Nehemiah asked to return to Jerusalem. How long he stayed this second time is not stated.⁵

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem what did he discover (v. 7)? A mess! The people had apparently forgotten the binding agreement/covenant they had made previously (10:28-39).

What action did Nehemiah take in response to finding Tobiah living in one of the Temple storerooms which Eliashib had converted into an apartment for him (vv. 8-9)? Nehemiah was so angry that he went into the temple room and tossed this enemy of Israel and his household goods out of the room. He then had the rooms purified, either ceremonially or by fumigation or both, and restored the temple articles and offerings that belonged there.⁶

Do his actions remind you of any other story in the Bible? Jesus turning over the tables and chasing the moneychangers out of the temple. Both Jesus and Nehemiah had the wisdom to know when to take bold action and the courage to do it. They were able to quickly discern right from wrong and were not afraid of confrontation.

Nehemiah left sometime after the wall had been rebuilt to return to King Artaxerxes. During his absence, he had appointed men who were trustworthy, men who were family, to lead the people. Several years later they had failed miserably. Why?? This was a classic leadership failure perhaps due to fear or a lack of conviction, his appointees became passive. They were unwilling to confront Eliashib (a man who was a spiritual leader in Israel) with the problem. They lacked courage and character.

What principles of leadership do we see in vv. 4-9? A leadership void always results in chaos, uncertainty and lack of commitment. That same leadership principle applies in the home and the church today. Men must step up and lead and not be passive.

What was the 2nd abuse that Nehemiah uncovered (v. 10)? Not providing for the Levites.....which was why Tobiah was able to occupy one of the temple storerooms. They were empty because the people had failed in their commitment to bring their tithes and offerings to the Levites. As a result, the Levites and others who were supposed to live off these offerings, as they performed spiritual services for the people, had to work in the fields caring for their livestock (Numbers 35:1-5). This meant they had less time to work in the temple.⁷

What action did Nehemiah take (v. 11-13)? He reprimanded the Jewish officials for neglecting this aspect of the work of the temple (the house of God). The officials had failed to make sure the people of Judah obeyed the Lord in these matters. What made this problem even more distressing for Nehemiah, and difficult to believe, is that these leaders had previously signed a covenant/binding agreement promising before the Lord and the people that they would never again let this happen. They had even said specifically, “We will not neglect the house of our God” (10:39b).⁸

He also stationed the Levites at their posts in the temple and appointed four men—a priest, a scribe, a Levite, and an assistant, all trustworthy men to oversee the distribution of the peoples’ tithes (grain, new wine, and oil). Also Nehemiah, as he so often did, prayed for God’s help in the matter (13:14). “Remember me” was a plea for help, not merely a request that God ... not forget something (cf. “remember me” in vv. 22, 29, 31; 5:19; 6:14 [twice]). Judah’s leader did not want his efforts of reform to be undone by the people’s neglect.⁹

¹ Gene A. Getz, “Nehemiah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 694.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 695

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid..

⁶ Ibid..

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid..

⁹ Ibid.