

## Nehemiah Chapters 10 and 13

The book of Nehemiah is one of the two historical books in the bible which describe events in Jerusalem immediately after the return of Judah from seventy years of captivity in the land of Babylon. The other post exilic book is Ezra. Three prophets were used by God to stir up the people after the return – Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

One might have expected a duly humbled and chastened people to return after experiencing divine judgement for their previous failures. So indeed we see much activity and zeal in these early years in Jerusalem. In Ezra chapter 3, we read of Zerubbabel committing themselves to rebuild the temple. In Nehemiah chapter 6, we read of how Nehemiah completed the rebuilding of the wall – done in only 52 days. In Nehemiah chapter 8, we read of how Ezra and his fellow priests stood up before all the people and read out to them the law of God.

So far, so good. It is a day of spiritual recovery. Now in Nehemiah chapter 10, the people of their own volition take one step further – they place themselves under a curse and a vow that they would keep the commandments of God.

28 And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding;

29 They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into 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 judgments and his statutes;

This was an encouraging word to hear. Had the people really changed? We note with caution, however, a previous occasion when all Israel said the same thing:

Ex 19:8 And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the LORD.

It wasn't long before the people broke one of the first commandments by worshipping the golden calf. So would this vow in Nehemiah chapter 10 be any more enduring?

30 And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons:

31 And if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt.

32 Also we made ordinances for us, to charge ourselves yearly with the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God;

33 For the shewbread, and for the continual meat offering, and for the continual burnt offering, of the sabbaths, of the new moons, for the set feasts,

and for the holy things, and for the sin offerings to make an atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.

38 And the priest the son of Aaron shall be with the Levites, when the Levites take tithes: and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes unto the house of our God, to the chambers, into the treasure house.

Three things are highlighted here – the unequal yoke, keeping the Sabbath day, and giving money and tithes to the temple for the service of the Lord. We can see how important these things are.

Taking part in a marriage with the sons and daughters of the land would lead initially to the dividing of their affections. But it would lead finally into idolatry by the people worshipping the gods of the Canaanites. Even Solomon, in his latter days was led into idolatry by his strange wives.

Secondly, they vowed to keep the Sabbath day. They would not trade with the merchants of the land on the Sabbath day. By the time that the Lord came to earth, the scribes and Pharisees had made the Sabbath day a burdensome task for the people. In seeking to define what constituted servile work, they had drawn up an endless list of do's and don'ts. Even the Lord was accused of breaking the Sabbath by healing on that day. But Israel should have looked upon this day as being a day of blessing. God had given them a day of rest from their labours. The nations round about them knew of no respite from their labours. Every day was the same – a day of endless toil. When Israel entered the wilderness, God told them not to gather manna on the Sabbath day – He would provide a double portion on the sixth day to see them through to the first of the week. God provided for them on the Sabbath day.

Not only did the people in Nehemiah 10 promise to keep the seventh day – they also vowed to keep the seventh year. Every seventh year, the land was to be left fallow, and to compensate for this, the Lord would provide them a bumper harvest in year six. Enough to eat in the seventh year without lifting a finger. What farmer today would not gladly accept such an offer?

Christians often speak of keeping the Sabbath, but of course we keep the first day of the week, not the seventh. For us, it should be a holy day, not because of a commandment to be obeyed, but a day to be kept out of a full heart in our desire to worship and serve our blessed Lord Jesus.

Thirdly, the people vowed to give the third part of a shekel for the service of the Lord and to bring their tithes to the Levites in the house.

I suppose the third item in our study would be linked to the first two. If we began to worship other things in our lives rather than the Lord Jesus, if we failed to keep the first day of the week by dividing our time with other things, then we would soon fail to bring our worship to God.

So, how did the people fare in keeping their curse and their vow? The answer is to be found in chapter 13 of Nehemiah.

We began by seeing how the early days of the return from Babylon were days of great revival. The temple was being rebuilt, the wall had been rebuilt, and the law had been read to the people by Ezra. What could possibly go wrong?

I don't know how many years had transpired between chapters 10 and 13 – I

suspect it is not all that many. Nehemiah himself had been called back to Persia on the king's business. On his return, he finds a number of things that disturb him. Our attention is drawn towards a chamber in the house of the Lord which had been designed for a particular purpose. It was once used to store the tithes and offerings of the people. The room was still filled but not with the tithes of the people. It contained rather the household stuff of a man called Tobiah. Throughout the book, we read of two men, Tobiah and Sanballat – sworn enemies of the people of God, determined to hinder and halt the progress of the rebuilding work. They did so by mockery, by letters to the king, and by a plot to kill Nehemiah himself. So how did one of these men finish up living in his private apartment in the temple? We read in chapter 6 that Tobiah had begun to exchange letters with certain nobles in the city – these men even tried to woo Nehemiah by speaking of the good works of Tobiah. By chapter 13, Tobiah was allied to Eliashib the high priest.

I suspect this chamber which had set aside for the tithes of the people did not remain empty for long. As soon as it was empty, it was given over to Tobiah. It is a simple lesson that if we leave voids in our spiritual life, Satan will soon see to it that the void is filled with other things.

And what about the Levites who should have been sustained by the tithes? In order to survive, they were out in the fields tending their lands.

There are a number of reasons why this dramatic change had taken place and we find them all in Nehemiah 13.

## **1. The word of God forgotten**

1 On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever;

2 Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing.

3 Now it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude.

The people had received into their midst certain of the Ammonites and Moabites. These peoples had been for centuries sworn enemies of Israel, even before they had entered the land. But now the book of Moses had been read regarding these nations and so they separated from them the mixed multitude.

What has the word of God to do with worship? Public worship is never to be used as a means of showing how clever we are or how gifted. But we need to read the word of God, and especially the gospels, in order to refresh our souls and give us the material to worship the Lord on a Sunday morning. In Genesis chapter 12, it was after Abram had obeyed God by entering the land of Canaan that he built his first altar and called upon the name of the Lord.

In Luke chapter 10, we first read of Mary of Bethany sitting at His feet and hearing His words. Those words led her to come as a worshipper in John chapter 12.

We do not, of course, read the word of God to acquire knowledge that we might display it as we meet to worship. Rather we gather up thoughts of the Lord Jesus that we might properly remember Him. That is why it is so important that we keep reading the four gospels. We read the epistles for doctrine, but the gospels for devotion.

In Nehemiah 13, the failure to separate themselves from the Ammonites and the Moabites suggests that the word of God had been forgotten.

Secondly, verse four tells us that there was a failure in leadership – Tobiah was allied unto Eliashib the high priest. Instead of leading the people in worship, the high priest was leading them astray. We are reminded here of the first high priest, Aaron, who made the golden calf for Israel, so leading them into idolatry. Elders today in the assembly should be able to lead by example in public worship.

Thirdly, in verse 6, we learn that Nehemiah was not in Jerusalem while all this was going on. He had been called away on the king's business. Had he been present, none of these failures that we find in chapter 13 would have taken place. In the book of Exodus, it was while Moses was up on Mount Sinai that the calf was made. "As for this Moses, we know not what has become of him".

Nehemiah immediately gets to grips with the problems leading to the failure in worship. The chamber containing the stuff of Tobiah is cleansed. There is no compromise with evil. There is only one thing to do with it – cast it out! Nehemiah then looks out into the fields. If no tithes are being given, how are the Levites managing to survive? Nehemiah finds them out in the fields seeking to make a living from their lands. Nehemiah rebukes the people. "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Soon the people bring again their tithes and offerings.

In verse 15, we find the fourth reason for Israel's failure – the profaning of the Sabbath day. The Jews themselves had broken it by treading out the wine presses and by bearing burdens into the city. The Sabbath day had also become market day and the merchants of Tyre came with their fish and other goods to sell outside the city. Nehemiah shut the gates of the city and chased away the men of Tyre.

The fifth reason for Israel's failure was the unequal yoke. The men of Israel had taken wives from amongst the nations round about them. The people of Ammon and Moab have already been mentioned at the start of the chapter – the mixed multitude. The inevitable had happened – living with them in their midst led to marriage and produced children who spoke half in the language of the Jews and half in the language of Ashdod.

The error of the unequal yoke soon reached the family of the high priest Eliashib, and his son had married the daughter of Sanballat, the other chief adversary of the people of God. Nehemiah held out no compromise for this pair. "I drove them from me".

Out of these five failures in Nehemiah 13, three of them had been spoken of in chapter 10 as part of their solemn vow

The unequal yoke

Keeping the Sabbath

Giving their tithes to God.

So far, our ministry has been rather negative. What would encourage us to worship?

In the gospels, we read of three women who came to worship the Lord Jesus. What brought them to Him?

The woman of the city in Luke 7 - the forgiveness of sins

Mary of Bethany – His words in Luke 10 and His work in John 11

Mary Magdalene in John 20 – the transformation in her life and the journey to Jerusalem.