

“Retry”
Nehemiah 13
December 31, 2023 | Mercy Hill Church

Big Idea: *The story of our lives doesn't have to be filled with just failures and mistakes, but can be filled with redemption, forgiveness and hope in Jesus as we persevere in keeping our eyes and hearts fixed on Him!*

Theme of Nehemiah: *Rebuilding a City & People for God*

- Chapters 1-7 Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem
- Chapters 8-13 Rebuilding (Reforming) God's People

Background/Context

- After the walls had been **rebuilt** (Nehemiah 1-7) and the people had been **reformed** by God's Word (Nehemiah 8), they **returned** to God through confession and repentance (Nehemiah 9), **renewed** their commitment (covenant) with God (Nehemiah 10), and **resettled** back in the city of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11) and **rejoiced** (Nehemiah 12).
- As we'll see in Nehemiah 13, Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem and returns to King Artaxerxes of Persia (who conquered Babylon, cf. Nehemiah 13:6) to his post as cupbearer (cf. Nehemiah 2:1). However, upon Nehemiah's return back to Jerusalem, things were definitely not the way he left them...and what seemed like a happy ending in Nehemiah 12 turns into a déjà vu of a nightmare for Nehemiah...

2 Main Points in Nehemiah 13:

1. Israel's Compromise (Sin)
2. Nehemiah's Response

Israel's Compromise (Sin)

1. Neglected the House of God (vv.4-7, 10)

- 2 areas the people of God compromised in sin by neglecting the House of God (Temple):
 - 1) One of the temple rooms which should have been used to store different items for worship – including tithes (of grain, wine and oil) to support the ministry of the Levites – was instead used and occupied by Tobiah (v.8 – “household furniture of Tobiah”)
 - Tobiah -- the same Tobiah who was an enemy of Nehemiah and the people of God – who was Sanballat's right hand man in doing everything they could from mockery to physical threats to false accusations of treason to questioning Nehemiah's motivation/character to even bribing a prophet to speak against Nehemiah all to prevent the walls of Jerusalem from being rebuilt (cf. Nehemiah 2:19-20, Nehemiah 4:1-14, Nehemiah 6: 1-14)
 - In addition, Tobiah was an Ammonite, didn't believe in Yahweh, God – yet he's using and occupying a room in the temple!
 - How? Why? Due to the personal connections he had with Eliashib the priest – not the same Eliashib the high priest. This Eliashib compromised the House of God due to a personal relationship with Tobiah. God's Temple was being neglected – desecrated – due to a personal compromise!
 - 2) Levites were not receiving the tithes & offerings that were supposed to receive.

- Seemed to be a combination of people not giving *and* the offerings weren't making their way to Levites (re: lack of storage & corruption) – consequently the Levites had to go back to their fields outside the Temple and city walls to provide for themselves...resulting in neglect of the temple (and worship of God)
- The House of God physically was being neglected and the operations of the House of God (by the Levites) were also being neglected
- **Not giving to God what belongs to God**
 - While the people of God were living in and around what appeared to be a rebuilt, growing and thriving city, they neglected the house of God.
 - Haggai 1:4 "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

2. **Broke the Sabbath (vv.15-16)**

- Not only did the people of God compromise and sin by neglecting the house of God, they also broke the Sabbath – one of the 10 commandments.
 - They were working – making and selling wine and produce – as well as buying
 - In addition, all this activity was not taking place outside the city walls (or in some back alley) but in broad open daylight in the city of Jerusalem itself (v.16)
 - The Sabbath was so important and serious that according to OT law (cf. Exodus 31:14-15) breaking it could lead to death!
- **Not trusting God's provision in rest & worship**
 - Purpose of the Sabbath was twofold:
 - For God's people to rest (cease from work) and worship (trust in God)
 - For God's people to be distinct and different from the world
 - By breaking the Sabbath, they were not only disobeying God, they were hurting themselves – bringing judgment. "Burden" language used here similar to Jeremah 17:21-24:
 - Jeremiah 17:21-24: ²¹Thus says the LORD: Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. ²²And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers. ²³Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck, that they might not hear and receive instruction. ²⁴"But if you listen to me, declares the LORD, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but keep the Sabbath day holy and do no work on it,

3. **Intermarried with Foreigners (vv.1b-2, 23-24, 28)**

- Not only did the people of God compromise by neglecting the house of God and breaking the sabbath, they also compromised by intermarrying with foreigners (pagan, non-believers)
- **Background/cultural context:** Back then, one's ethnicity/nationality and religion were tied together in those times. As mentioned previously, this passage (and other passages in the Bible) is not against inter-racial/ethnic marriages.
 - In the OT, we see examples of Moses' wife (a Cushite), Ruth the Moabite, and not a single word from God judging or condemning them or their marriages
 - In the cultural/historical context of the time, ethnicity/nationality was tied to religion/spirituality
 - To be Jewish meant to worship God (Yahweh) and to not be Jewish meant one worshiped some other gods or goddesses – of course there were exceptions!
 - Very unlike today where ethnicity and religion are mixed: an Indian Christian, a Chinese Muslim, a Mexican Hindu and a Buddhist Caucasian.

- Rather, back then, intermarriage meant compromising one's faith, allegiance and commitment to God
- In addition, the ripple effect on the children (v.24)
 - Another example that these people of God were "marrying out" -- not "marrying in." The children were not being exposed to and learning Hebrew (re: know who God is through His Word) but rather Ashdod (and other foreign languages) and consequently not knowing God's Word and who God is.
- Even worse in v.28 sin of intermarriage even occurred in the family of Eliashib the high priest. Jehoida married the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite (cf. Nehemiah 3:19, 4:1) – who was the main enemy of Nehemiah in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem!
- **Not being faithful to God**
 - V.26 references one of the most powerful & wisest kings, King Solomon – yet he compromised and gave in when it came to relationships:
 - 1 Kings 11:1-2: Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, ²from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love.
 - 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 ¹⁴Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵What harmony is there between Christ and Belial^[a]? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?

Summary of Israel's compromise (sins)

- What's (un)surprising, shocking and tragic is that these compromises (sin) which Nehemiah saw upon his return the exact specific areas they had just made (re)commitment – a covenant – with God previously in Nehemiah 10:
 - Nehemiah 10:32-39 – Would not neglect the house of God through tithes and offerings
 - Nehemiah 10:31 – Honoring the Sabbath
 - Nehemiah 10:30 – Wouldn't intermarry with foreigners (non-believers)

Nehemiah's Response

- So how does Nehemiah respond to these three compromises (sins) of Israel? How would you have responded if you were Nehemiah and came back to all this?
 - Nehemiah doesn't think or say, "Well, could be much worse...at least they're doing some good stuff and following God in other ways..." Nehemiah doesn't turn a blind eye to sin, doesn't overlook it. Nehemiah doesn't give up on the people and say, "Oh well, I guess that's just how they'll be...I guess that's just the way it is...I did what I could...I'll wash my hands clean of this mess and head back to the king..."
- Nehemiah responds in three (3) ways:
- 1. **Spoke Up (Confronted) (vv.11, 17, 25)**
- Nehemiah speaks out, confronts, challenges, rebukes areas of compromise and sin *specifically to those involved or responsible*
 - Same word "confront" used 3x:
 - V.11 Confronts (rebukes) the officials who were neglecting the Levites
 - V.17 Confronts (rebukes) the nobles who were breaking the Sabbath
 - V.25 Confronts (rebukes) those who intermarried

- Nehemiah doesn't gossip about it, post on Facebook, tweet, write a blog post, record a video ranting on Tik-Tok, etc.
 - Cf. Hebrews 12:5-8
- 2. Took Action (vv.8-9, 13, 19-22, 25, 28)**
- Neglecting the House of God:
 - Throws out Tobiah's household furniture and cleansed the room (v.8), and brought back all the items that were supposed to be stored there for worship of God (v.9)
 - Restored proper tithes & offerings to the Levites and appointed reliable, trustworthy, and faithful people (Shelemiah – priest, Zadok – scribe, Pedaiah – Levite, Hanan – assistant) to oversee and ensure the Levites, priests and all those involved in helping with the Temple worship. (vv.12-13)
 - Breaking the Sabbath:
 - Ordered the city gates to be closed at sundown (beginning of the Sabbath) until after the Sabbath (v.19a)
 - Stationed people at the gates (vv.19b-22)
 - Intermarrying:
 - Cursed them – not in the R-rated way or “magic spell” but rather in keeping with covenant stipulation of blessing and curses (punishments) (v.25a)
 - Beat them up – and pulled out their hair (v.25b) – a form of public shaming meant as a rebuke for shameful conduct.
 - Made them take an oath (v.25c) – recommit, renew their promises to God
 - Some of the actions of Nehemiah seem drastic – even perhaps inappropriate or un-Christian-like. Perhaps in this passage we see that taking sin seriously sometimes requires drastic measures. [Caveat: These actions aren't necessarily prescriptive but rather descriptive]

3. Prayed (vv.14, 22b, 31b)

- Prayer is an integral part of the story of Nehemiah. From the beginning of Nehemiah 1 all the way until last words of Nehemiah in this final chapter, Nehemiah continually turns to the Lord in prayer – in confession, in praise and in petition.
 - The thread of prayers is interwoven through almost every chapter of Nehemiah!
- With each confrontation, after each action, Nehemiah knows and believes ultimately it has to be the Lord's work – not his.
 - Each prayer (vv.14, 22b, 31b) begins with “Remember” – don't forget! Help me! Show mercy! Don't let what I did for you Lord be in waste!
 - Also calls on God to enact justice (v.29) – knowing Nehemiah himself is not the ultimate judge.

Christ Connection

- On one level, it's natural to place ourselves in Nehemiah's sandals – what are the things we can learn from Nehemiah's life and example. What we can learn from how Nehemiah responded to sin: confront, take action and pray.
- Yet, to stop there would be missing the greater point and the greater story. We ultimately are not Nehemiah but rather like the people of Israel. We are the ones who regularly compromise and sin. Often times in the same ways and areas over and over again.
 - And that's the story of the Old Testament
 - Judges – God raising up leaders (judges) to rescue and redeem the people of God – only for them to fall back into sin...judges effective yet only temporary change.

- Kings – King after king, often more idolatrous and selfish than the next, insufficient to lead the people of God. The exception were the rare kings who walked in the ways of the Lord – but eventually replaced by another wicked king
 - Prophets – warning and calling the people of God into repentance – often time only for them to succumb back to the same old sins of idolatry
- Nehemiah is just another person who was able to enact some positive change and reform...but only lasted a short while...more outside-in than truly inside-out...and the ending of Nehemiah leaves us hanging, wondering, perhaps even a bit skeptical about what's next? Leaves us longing for some sort of conclusion or resolution or happy ending...
- The book of Nehemiah and the person of Nehemiah point us to Jesus where we get the resolution or happy ending: Why God in His mercy, grace and faithfulness ultimately sent Jesus:
 - To speak up and confront sin – Jesus didn't just address or try to change the external behaviors of sin (like Nehemiah) but ultimately confronted the sins of our hearts (re: Jesus confronting the Pharisees the Sadducees)
 - To take action – Jesus' life and ministry wasn't just about speaking and teaching but also healed others, changed people's hearts and ultimately took *drastic* measures to fight and conquer sin – the power and consequences of our sin – on the cross, to his own death so that we might be free and find life eternal in Him!
 - To pray – Even though Jesus died on the cross, resurrected, and ascended back to the right hand of the Father, Jesus is our advocate, our great high priest who continues to intercede on our behalf in prayer! (cf. Romans 8:34, 1 John 2:1, Hebrews 7:25, Luke 22:31-34)
- All the Old Testament points to, leads to, directs us to the need for a Savior, a Messiah, a King, a Lord like no other – from Genesis to Exodus to Leviticus to Numbers to Deuteronomy, Judges...1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings...Psalms...the Prophets on through to Malachi – found in Jesus!
 - Romans 5:1-5: Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
 - So, if you are in Christ (re: your trust, your hope, your faith is in Jesus), even in the midst of struggles, sin, failures and mistakes you have the assurance of peace and hope in and through Jesus. And because of that, even as you look back at areas of sins, compromise hurt and disappointment, you can get back up and try again and run this spiritual race with perseverance keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus!

Big Idea: *The story of our lives doesn't have to be filled with just failures and mistakes, but can be filled with redemption, forgiveness and hope in Jesus as we persevere in keeping our eyes and hearts fixed on Him!*

Reflection/Application Questions

- As you reflect on the past months/year, what are some areas (church, work, home) where you have, currently are, or might be tempted to compromise (to sin) as you follow Jesus? Why?
- Are there areas where you need to take drastic action -- or pray about -- in dealing with certain areas of sin? What might it look like? Is there someone you know that you can encourage (or perhaps even confront or be in prayer for) in their walk with Jesus?

- In what areas of your life do you need to be reminded of the Gospel and the power of Jesus to redeem and transform you? Who are some people around you who need to be reminded that they are not a "finished product" but a, "work in progress"?
- Parent Corner: What are some ways you can encourage, teach, be an example to your children what it looks like to persevere in dependence on Jesus despite setbacks?