

The Gospel-Centered Life

August 2, 2026

Nehemiah 13; 1 John 1:9 - 2:2

Introduction

(Title Slide) Our family started to grow when we lived in Nashville, TN. Our first son, Trey, was born in 2004, and then our second son, Jonathan, was born in 2006.

In 2008, our lives took a sudden turn, requiring us to move from Nashville to South Carolina (Gamecock country). But in 2012, the Lord took us back there, something that we were very excited to do because it felt a bit like going home.

But when we got back there, we actually experienced what we knew to be cognitively true: life goes on. People move on. We were virtually unable to pick up many of our old friendships right where we left off. Enough life without us had taken place so that it was harder to reconnect with folks, if we could at all. The same was true on our end – we had changed so much over those 4 years that people weren't sure they could be the same friends with the new Rob and Holly or the older Trey and Jonathan.

(Slide) Relational psychologists have a phrase for this – frozen representation. It's our tendency to hold a static mental model of a person that stops updating when they are out of daily contact. Your brain files them under who they were the last time you had regular interaction, and that file sits untouched until you see them again.

(Slide) Sociologists will use the phrase relational discontinuity. A relationship doesn't continue in a normal developmental arc. It paused, and both parties changed during the pause, and now the relationship has to reckon with two people who are no longer who they were when the pause began.

In our text today, we're going to read about Nehemiah's experience with a version of these concepts. After the rebuilding of the wall and the resettlement of Jerusalem ... after all of the repentance and worship and revival experiences ... Nehemiah went back to serve King Artaxerxes as his cupbearer. But after about 12-13 years, Nehemiah went back, and things were not as they had been when he left. And what he experiences teaches us something about people, something about leadership, and something about God, and all of these things are really helpful for us as we seek to walk with the Lord this academic year. **(Title Slide)**

Body

When Nehemiah arrived back at Jerusalem, he found a city that looked familiar but had quietly drifted in his absence. Eliashib the priest had given Tobiah, the same Tobiah who had opposed the wall from the beginning, a large room inside the temple, the very room where the tithes for the Levites had been stored. With no place for the tithes, the tithes stopped coming. With no support, the Levites had abandoned the temple and gone back to their fields, and worship in Jerusalem had collapsed. Nehemiah threw Tobiah's furniture into the street, restored the tithes, and appointed a team of four trustworthy men to guard the storerooms.

He then discovered that the Sabbath had eroded. People were making wine, hauling produce, and buying from foreign merchants on the holy day, so he confronted the nobles and ordered the city gates shut from sundown to sundown.

Finally, he found that intermarriage with surrounding peoples had produced a generation of children who could no longer speak the language of the covenant, and even the grandson of the high priest had married into the family of Sanballat. Nehemiah confronted the offenders, drove out the compromised priest, and closed the book with three short prayers asking God to remember him.

The Nature of People

There's just a ton in the passage to learn about our human nature, but the main thing I want to call out today is that *(Slide) people drift.*

The people in this chapter didn't renounce the covenant. They didn't tear up the vows they'd written and sealed. They just stopped paying attention. They drifted. One thing just slowly led to another, and before they knew it, no one was giving enough to support the work of the temple, and an enemy of God was living in it. One thing led to another, and Chick-Fil-A was open on a Saturday. One thing led to another, and marital compromise was commonplace.

Illustration – Playing in the Ocean

In the same way that people naturally follow the powers of the wind and water at the beach and get pushed down the coastline, is it the nature of the human heart to drift toward the path of least resistance unless something is actively holding it in place. And the drift always makes sense at the moment. Every compromise Nehemiah confronted had a reasonable explanation the day it was made. Only after years does the shape of the drift become clear.

Which leads me to the second thing we should take note of about the nature of people *(Slide) – The people closest to the compromise are the ones least able to see it.* Eliashib does not see what he has done. The Sabbath-breakers do not see what they have done. The intermarried families do not see what they have done. It takes someone who has been away and has more objectivity to name what has happened. Familiarity is a kind of blindness.

Illustration – Finding the Blueberries

My presumptive familiarity with the contents of the fridge prevented me from seeing what was clearly there, in plain view for me to see. I needed a wise and objective person to show me because I was too close to see it on my own.

Leaders and Leadership

But we also learn something about leaders and leadership in this chapter. Many biblical commentators talk about leadership through Nehemiah, and there are a number of good books on leadership that work their way through Nehemiah. I don't think that is the PURPOSE of the book and have therefore refrained from bringing up this topic, but chapter 13 is just too rich on this to ignore. Let's touch on just three things.

Poor Leadership Accelerates Drift

(Slide) First, poor leadership accelerates drift (stronger current, higher winds). Eliashib the priest is at the center of every failure in this chapter. He is the one who gave Tobiah the room. His grandson is the one who married Sanballat's daughter. When the shepherds compromise, the sheep scatter. The drift of the people began and accelerated due to poor leadership. John Maxwell popularized the truism, "Everything rises and falls on leadership." It's true. A leader sets the tone, builds the culture, and dictates the ultimate limit of an organization's potential.

(Slide) Second, faithful leadership requires a specific set of instincts. Nehemiah models several. ***(Slides as I say them)***

- ***He notices*** what others have stopped noticing, which requires both proximity and a certain distance.
- ***He confronts*** directly rather than working around the problem. He does not simply denounce the failure.
- ***He rebuilds*** the systems that allowed the failure, appointing a team of four trustworthy men to guard the storerooms rather than trusting one man to do it again.
- ***He fears God***, not man.
- ***He prays***. The four short "remember me" prayers at the end of the chapter tell us that Nehemiah's leadership was sustained by his ongoing relationship with God.

(Slide) Third, we see that leaders have limits. There is a limit to what leaders can do. Nehemiah is a good leader. He is arguably one of the best leaders in the Old Testament. But his reforms didn't last the first time, and they won't last this second time. Nehemiah can reform what he can see and enforce what he is present to enforce, but the moment he leaves, the drift starts again. ***(Slide) The best human leader in the world cannot produce a people whose hearts do not drift.***

What we Learn about God

Which leads us to our last category: what we learn about God. The entire book is, of course, about God, but these three things are particularly relevant for us today.

(Slide) First, God is unwavering in His resolve to be in a relationship with His people. The whole chapter ... Indeed, the whole book ... is a picture of a God who does not let his people drift into destruction without intervention. He is not passive. He is not resigned. **He is a God who returns, again and again, to a people who cannot be trusted to hold what they have promised.**

(Slide) Second, God works through covenant love. Listen closely to the second part of Nehemiah's prayer in v. 22. – **Remember me for this also, my God, and look on me with compassion according to the abundance of your faithful love.**

The word translated "faithful love" in v. 22, is **hesed**. It is the covenant love that keeps loving when the covenant partner has stopped keeping his or her end of the promise. Nehemiah does not appeal to his own record when he prays. He appeals to God's steadfast love ... his **hesed** love. He knows that even his best reforms will not save him. Only God's love will.

(Slide) Third, God knows the drift is greater than any human reformer can address.

- Nehemiah can throw Tobiah's furniture out of the temple, but he cannot pull idolatry out of the human heart.
- He can shut the gates on the Sabbath, but he cannot give people the rest they actually need.
- He can break up the marriages that threaten the next generation's identity, but he cannot give the next generation a new heart.

Every reform in this chapter addresses a symptom. None of them address the core issue.

(Title Slide)

The core issue is that we are a people who drift, and no external reform, no matter how well designed, can produce internal fidelity. What the people of God need is a Reformer whose work does not wear off. What we need is a covenant that cannot be broken because it does not depend on our keeping. What we need is a new heart.

That is what God promised through the prophets who lived during and after Nehemiah's era.

- Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant written not on stone but on the heart.
- Ezekiel spoke of a God who would remove the heart of stone and give a heart of flesh.

And in the fullness of time, God himself came in the person of his Son to be the faithful Israel we could not be, to keep the covenant we broke, to bear the judgment our drift deserved, and to send his Spirit to write his law on our hearts so that our fidelity is not finally a matter of our resolve but of his indwelling presence.

Nehemiah 13 ends with a tired reformer asking God to remember him. The gospel is that God has remembered his people by sending his Son, Jesus.

- Jesus does not merely reform the temple. He replaces it. He becomes the place where God dwells with his people, the sacrifice by which sin is atoned, the mediator through whom prayer is heard, and the gathering point for the nations. And when the Spirit unites us to him, we ourselves become the temple he indwells.
- He does not merely enforce the Sabbath. He gives us rest. He gives us a rest not for a day but forever, because he himself has done the work on which our rest depends.
- He does not merely guard the language of the covenant. He writes it on our hearts.

Gospel invitation – *The drift can be reversed. Not by our effort. By the Spirit of the risen Christ, who is writing on hearts of flesh what could never be written on hearts of stone.*

Prayer