

# Nehemiah 13

# EPILOGUE:

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It is easier to backslide than remain faithful.

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# Mission success and failure—

- God is always at work pursuing His mission of redemption and the revelation of His name.
- God arranged the outcome of human history to fulfill His prophetic word to bring His people home again.
- And yet, once back in Jerusalem by prophetic fulfillment, entire generations passed without any concern to see the purposes of God move forward.

- Tragically, churches are all too often a microcosm of Jerusalem and their congregations a representation of the people in Jerusalem: comfortable with an incomplete obedience and content with a broken representation of the purposes of God!

# “I looked for a man . . .”

- In every generation and in every church, God is looking for those whose hearts are aligned with His and whose highest priority is to fulfill His prophetic ambitions.
- To move His work forward, God had to go 900 miles to a pagan palace to find a man whose heart was aligned with His heart and purposes. For Nehemiah, it was unacceptable that God’s work was not moving forward. Is the same true of us?

# Much more than just a wall . . .

- The broken wall was symptomatic of deeper issues—
  - (1) a lack of interest in the work of God;
  - (2) a lack of obedience to the Word of God;
  - (3) a lack of concern for the revelation of God and a testimony to the nations of His exclusiveness.

- Like David, Nehemiah was determined to build a testimony that would prove that the God of Israel was the one and only God:  
*So on October 2 the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun. When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God. (6.15-16)*
- What have we endeavored to do for God that has caused the community around us to recognize the power of our God or to experience the grace of the gospel of Christ?

- With the wall rebuilt and a testimony established, Nehemiah turned his attention to renewing the worship and restoring the ministry. For decades, the people had chosen—
  - (1) a superficial and incomplete obedience to the Law of God,
  - (2) indifference to the quality of worship that truly honored God,
  - (3) to debilitate the work of God through their neglect to tithe,
  - (4) individual preferences over community commitment.

# Commitment that counts—

*The people responded, “In view of all this, we are making a solemn promise and putting it in writing.” . . . They solemnly promised to carefully follow all the commands, regulations, and decrees of the LORD our Lord. (9.38; 10.29)*

When the people heard the Law of God, they recognized their failure and committed themselves to careful obedience. Hearing that leads to obedience is the real proof that we are true followers of Jesus (Matthew 7.21-27).

In response to hearing the Law of God and seeing their failure, all of the people made a solemn commitment: "We promise together not to neglect the Temple of our God."

Their five "action commitments" are essential components for sustaining the work of God and enabling it to move forward. When neglected, the work of God is constricted and the mission of God is sabotaged.

These five commitments are applicable to the work and mission of God in every local church, in any setting and era.

The work of God literally thrives or withers, is fully enabled or is short-changed, on the basis of these actions and the faithfulness of God's people to keep these commitments.

- (1) We commit to live and act together as a faithful community.
- (2) We commit to submit ourselves to the authority of God's Word.
- (3) We commit to building Christ-like marriages and raising our children to be the next generation of spiritual leaders.
- (4) We commit ourselves to live by God's priorities and "rule of life"—and not to live life as the people and culture around us.
- (5) We commit ourselves to honor God with the "first" and the best of our finances, presence, effort, and time.

# A few years later . . .

*When I arrived back in Jerusalem . . . I immediately confronted the leaders and demanded, “Why has the Temple of God been neglected?” (13.7, 11)*

Having accomplished the mission of rebuilding the wall, restoring the ministry, and renewing the worship of God, Nehemiah returned to King Artaxerxes as he had originally promised to do. Securing permission to return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah discovered that the people had become egregiously unfaithful in their commitment.

## What did Nehemiah discover?

- Eliahshib, the priest in charge of the storeroom for the tithes, had accommodated Tobiah, his relative and a man opposed to God's work, with a room in the courtyards of the Temple of God (13.6-8).
- Those appointed by God for ministry in the Temple were not being adequately supported through tithes and offerings and had found it necessary to find other employment (13.10-11).

- The people were working and transacting business on the Sabbath, ignoring God's priorities and rule of life, and instead living according to the ways of "non-followers" (13.15-22).
- God's design and purpose for marriage was being ignored and the next generation completely lacked the identity and understanding of being God's "set apart" people (13.23-27).

The people had vowed faithful commitment; instead, in just a few short years, they had become backslidden.

- (1) Instead of unity in commitment, everyone was doing what was individually preferable and convenient (see Judges 21.25).
- (2) Instead of faithful support with their “first” and best, the work of God was crippled by their neglect of tithes and offerings.

- (3) Instead of living by God's priorities and rule of life, they were living life in relationship with and conformity to the ways of the unbelievers around them.
- (4) Instead of training up the next generation of spiritual leaders, their children reflected the lifestyle, language and spiritual ignorance of the surrounding culture.

# Subtle and insidious—

*“I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again.”* (Revelation 3.1-3)

The fact is, correlated over and over throughout Scripture, you and I are more likely to backslide than to remain faithful. And because backsliding is so subtle and insidious, we won't even realize when it has happened, nor will we be open to acknowledging it.

In his letters to the seven churches in Asia, Jesus rebuked five for their backslidden condition. His word to the churches at Ephesus and Sardis are especially important for us to hear:

*Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place.*

*Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*

Jesus had declared that “the love of most would grow cold.” It had happened to the believers in Ephesus but they weren’t even aware of their condition. The Apostle Paul had written that people would have a “form of godliness” but lacking the manifestation of the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit; it was true of the church at Sardis, yet they too were ignorant of their condition.

In keeping with the testimony of Scripture, we need to acknowledge that we are more likely to be in a backslidden condition than living in faithful commitment to the purposes of God. Do we have the humility and honesty to accept this fact of Scripture?

To “backslide” means to regress, to do less and be less, to go backwards from where we previously were. Let’s ask ourselves:

- Am I doing less in community with other believers than a year ago? Five or ten years ago?
- Is my relationship with Christ characteristic of intimate marriage oneness or casual acquaintance?
- Can I see how I have grown in the last year in Christ-likeness and the fruit of the Spirit? Can it be seen by others?

- Is my marriage an ever-growing reflection of and a witness to the relationship between Christ and His bride? Is it increasingly characterized by tenderness, consideration, sacrificial love, mutual respect, and devotion?
- Am I less or more engaged in Christ's mission of reaching people who don't know Christ as their Savior? Was there a time when I had more concern and was doing more than I am doing now?

Furthermore—

- What would Jesus say to us as a church? Does He see a collection of individuals or a body in unity? Does He see **us** growing more in prayer, Christ-likeness, and mission as those to whom He has entrusted the ministry of reconciliation?
- Does our way of life reflect more and more that we are followers of Christ or is our way of life more selective of our culture and its way of living?

# Backsliding is inevitable unless—

- I am intentionally making every effort to add to my faith in *increasing* measure. (2 Peter 1.5, 8)
- I am diligent in growing spiritually so that my progress is *evident* to everyone. (1 Timothy 4.15-17)
- I am engaged *daily* with other believers in accountability and encouragement. (Hebrews 3.12-13)
- I am meeting *more*, not less, with other believers in anticipation of the coming of Christ. (Hebrews 10.24-25)

*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.*

—2 Corinthians 13.5

*Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.*

—1 Corinthians 11.28