

Transcription of 17ID1975

Nehemiah 13:15-31 "The Need for Daily Diligence - Pt 2" December 10, 2017

Let's open our Bibles this morning to Nehemiah 13:15.

I hope you've enjoyed going through the book. I've had the opportunity, over the last many years, to write lots of books. My wife actually has written a lot of those inductive studies from our notes. But we wrote a book on Nehemiah a year ago or so. We wanted to make it available to you this morning for \$5. You'll not get that anywhere else because we're the only ones who have it (Laughing) for \$5. Anyway, all of the studies for the last four and a half months are in there, so it would make a great gift for someone. You should know that of all the books that we've written we don't profit at all, my wife and me personally. We signed all of the rights over to the church from the minute that they were written. We wrote them on church time. They were written with years of experience in the church, so we think that that's the right way to go. So all of the profits from book sales (that we write) go to the radio and support the radio (ministry) across the country. So, if you want, you can pick them up today; not tomorrow. It'll only be available today. They've got a bunch of them over there, so you can go check what I did. Maybe I misspoke here, and then you can correct it in the book. I don't know.

Nehemiah had served as governor and overseer in Jerusalem for about a dozen years - from 445 through about 433 B.C. - before the king, Artaxerxes, called him back to Shushan (or back to Babylon) in about the thirty-second year of his reign. We found that out in verse 6 of this chapter. We don't know how long Nehemiah was gone - some undisclosed time - but eventually he got to come back to the city that he loved and to the people that he had led and to go back to the God that he had served. He had left the city in great revival (the first three verses of this chapter as well as chapter 12 and all). The sacrifices were being offered daily. The Sabbath day was being honored. The ministry at the Temple was valuable to the people, and it was supported.

Last week, we looked at the first fourteen verses of this chapter to realize that when Nehemiah returned, things were not as how he left them at all. It had become a very sad state of affairs. The Temple worship had been forsaken. The priests were no longer supported, and so they had gone back to farming to take care of the needs of their families. A fellow named Eliashib, who was the high

priest at the time, had allowed one of the perennial enemies of Israel, a fellow named Tobiah (he was an Ammonite who had married a Jewish woman, kind of gotten in that way) to live not only in the city but upon the hill, upon the Temple Mount, and actually in the place that God had devoted and was devoted to the service of the Lord. It used to hold the offerings that the people would bring to support the sacrifices every day. But those were all gone now. In short order, the spiritual leadership was either missing, or it was corrupted, and the Temple was closed. And during that little time that Nehemiah was gone - however long it might have been - people quickly turned back to the path of destruction. It didn't take very long.

Maybe the best analogy I can use is exercise. I don't know if you've ever committed yourself to gettin' in shape or losin' weight. I do it every Monday. (Laughing) But if you get started, it's easy to stop. It is hard to keep going. And the minute you stop, you'll look the same as you've always looked in about two weeks. It's just terrible. "Look how much better I look! My pants are fittin' better." Yeah, for about two weeks. That's about how long it's going to last when you stop.

And it's kind of like that spiritually. You stop doing what you should be doing to keep yourself spiritually healthy, and it's amazing how quickly you'll begin to run downhill, away from the relationship that you have with the Lord. So, it doesn't take long for the enemy to kind of move in, to those places that God once occupied. And that was true here as well.

So Nehemiah, as the spiritual leader that we've come to know that he is, quickly sets about to rectify the problems, if you will. He throws out this fellow Tobiah on his ear. He dumps his stuff out at the street. He fumigates, if you will, the Temple area. He goes and he meets with the (verse 11) rulers and the leaders. He contends with them. "What are you doing? How did you let this go so bad?" He orders the priests back to work. He changes the administration (in verses 13 and 14), the management, the oversight, and the accountability which was not really being handled very well. And the people immediately found confidence again to not only give to this ministry (as they should have to support that daily sacrifice that the LORD had asked of His people), but they found themselves returning back to a relationship with God that they had forsaken while Nehemiah was gone.

Nehemiah, in verse 14 (and we'll see it again a couple times as we finish the book this morning), says the same thing to the LORD, "LORD, remember me for good." I mean, these were hard steps for him to take in leadership, but he just wanted to please the LORD. And this morning we really are going to finish on the note of restoration of the people back to the simple things of God. And these are the necessary things for daily diligence.

We read, in verse 15, "In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions." Now the Sabbath was to be for the Jews a time of rest (Exodus 31). It was a covenant that was unique to them, between them and the LORD. But in Nehemiah's absence, the people had quickly neglected the Temple and gone back again to do the very things that the LORD had said not to do. They put personal gain and commerce over their spiritual commitment to God, and so the doors now were open, and the Sabbath day was like any other Sabbath day. It was just another day to them. It is far different from what you might remember reading back in chapter 10 of this book where the people said, "We're going to separate ourselves from the world. We're going to set holy the Sabbath and all that it means. And we're going to put the LORD before the gain." And, as they did, God began to bless them. But now, they were not interested in it at all. When they were reading the Bible and their hearts were convicted and there was hunger and repentance (back in chapter 9, for example), the people realized that this was one of the areas they had disobeyed the LORD and, as a result, had run into His wrath. They were striving to get by. Things were very difficult for them. They'd vowed to never let it happen again, that, "We're going to put first things first." If you go back and read chapters 9 and 10, they wept over their realized failure. But now Nehemiah has kind of moved away, and there's not really that leadership that they needed; and having spent some time away from the Scriptures and out of fellowship and without, really, anyone to follow, they fall quickly back into this sin and this flesh and this desire for worldly gain again. Big warning in this book, that revival is something that takes place as we look to the Lord. But we have to keep looking. And how often you read of Nehemiah, here in these last couple of verses, contending with the rulers and the elders because it really did start with them. It was poor oversight, and they didn't give the people much direction.

So, he starts by speaking directly to the merchants. Notice, in verse 15, he "saw" what was going on. He then went out, and he "warned them about the day on which they were selling their provisions." And he said, verse 16, "Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, 'What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day?' " Nothing wrong with business. Necessary for life. But not at the expense of your relationship with God. And that's what really had happened. The world and what you might (if you isolated it) - here's a hardworking, honest guy who gets up early and packs up his stuff and wants to sell his products - all good. The timing is all bad. And they had fallen back because they were a different people - God's people - back into the worldly ways of life. They were no longer leading that life that would be an example to the world around them. They were actually now being led by the unbelievers around them. They were following people who didn't care about God or didn't care about God's ways, and they had offered their city (which God had put a fence around and put His name upon) of Jerusalem to be a place of selling and buying and trading while the spiritual commitment of the people faltered. So they no longer shine anymore. They don't stand out. There's nothing different about them at all. Their obedience to God had been set aside. And notice that Nehemiah goes right after the leaders again, and he says to them, "What are you doing?" You know, if you want to lead spiritually, then do so. "What evil is it that you've brought upon God's people? You've allowed the people to come in here to profane the Sabbath! You of all people should know better than that. What are you up to? Why are you doing this?" And it broke his heart. But he called them into question. Like I said, it's a tough place to be if you really want to be a leader spiritually because you run into, constantly, this determination on the part of others to just kind of move the line ever so slightly, time and time again.

" 'Did not,' " verse 18, " 'your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.' " "Isn't this what got us into trouble last time? Remember the LORD had said you had never let the land rest. 'You owe Me seventy years' worth of rest, one for every seven years.' " He took them into captivity. It had been 490 years, and they hadn't let the land rest at all. "This has gotten us in trouble before. Wake up, man!" And you read this, and you want to say, "Well, where is that really encouraging, loving, cheering-on Nehemiah? Where is he? Where's that nice guy that was encouraging us?" Well, he's still here; he's just wearing a

different hat at the moment. He really does want the people to do well, and he sees the problem, walks into town (verse 15), sees what's going on, goes to the people who are responsible and calls them into question.

"So it was," verse 19, "at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day." The solution: "I'm not going to let it happen anymore." Notice that the rulers hadn't changed much, but Nehemiah was sure not going to let this happen on his watch. So he orders the commerce out. "There'll be no more sales items in the bulletin." We had, for a year or two as a young church, a church directory where everybody's names and addresses and phone numbers (I don't know if we even had emails at the time, I guess we probably had a couple of them). Anyway, some guy got ahold of it and started calling everyone in the church on our behalf. "Well, the church wanted me to call you, offer you some really good deals on insurance," and he actually used the church directory to market the church. We had somebody else that was doing Tupperware parties. Remember those. But anyway, they were just sending out letters to people and using the information from the church to profit themselves. And we finally said, "We just have to get rid of the thing." We couldn't really have it out. It should be something that you should be able to have, but we can't because there's always a goof who has to take advantage. And here's Nehemiah, and his solution for the problem is, "I'm just going to lock the doors." It hadn't changed anybody's heart yet, but he wasn't about to just let it happen. And he even staffed the gates with his own people, at least for a while, to enforce godly practices. He said, "Look, we can't do this." Now, look, he's not forcing righteousness. He can't, really. You can't change somebody's heart. But, at the same time, if he's responsible and he has authority, he's almost obligated from a leadership standpoint to enforce policies and practices that would honor the LORD. And he doesn't provide any leeway to practice because it had been going on long enough, and it had not been blessing at all. If they didn't like it, they could go live somewhere else. But here in the city where he was the governor, this is the way that it was going to be.

We read, in verse 20, "Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice." (They were there a couple of weeks). "Then I warned them, and said to them, 'Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!' " (not to pray). "From that time on they

came no more on the Sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day." And he said, "Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!" Sin will always wait at the door, and if you'll let it in, it'll come in, and if you'll give it room, it'll take up the space. Nehemiah, again some radical decisions were made. The people came back a couple of weeks. Nehemiah threatened them. I'm sure that someone said of Nehemiah that he had anger issues, and, "Where's your Christian attitude?" But sometimes street justice, I guess. Here came Nehemiah. It's all they knew. "Don't come back." He has the upper hand. And then notice he puts the responsibility upon the Levites. They were to enforce the laws of God and godly behavior. And then Nehemiah does this, "LORD, please bless me for this, too, and give me grace and mercy." I suspect he was not the most popular guy in town. In fact, I would guess that there were people that really wanted to see him gone. But, look, his interest is not popularity or self-interest. He values the blessings of God and the people of God more than the benefits that he might have gotten by not being so strong, and so he wanted God's blessing. He only had one goal - please the LORD. And he says, for the second time (verse 14 and again here), "Remember this, LORD. Spare me." Because I think he had a target on him now. Now he's messin' up people's businesses. He's shuttin' down profit streams on the Sabbath. He's tellin' folks that "not in this town - we don't have that, we don't do that here." And he is seeking to restore what had once brought great blessing as a result of the revival and had kind of been fallen away from when he had not been there.

Then we read, in verse 23, "In those days I also saw" (he wasn't having a good time comin' back, I think) "Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people." Here's another problem - the intermarrying of the Jews with the heathen nations roundabout them that God had clearly forbidden that they were to do, time and again. And, as a result (and this is why we think that Nehemiah was gone for quite some time), the kids were now born and speaking, and they were no longer speaking Hebrew. They had lost their ability. Many had already lost it in captivity. But now those who did remember - the priests' kids and all - were also losing the ability to read God's Word or to learn the language. And so, back in chapter 10 again, verses 28-30, they had said to the LORD in the revival, "We're not going to intermarry. We're going to separate ourselves like the LORD wants. We're God's people. We're to live different lives. We don't want to be influenced for the wrong thing. And so

we're going to do this thing the way that the LORD wants." They said that in chapter 10. But this is chapter 13. And several years had passed, and the good intentions that they had were now dissipated because they weren't any longer concerned with what God had said. It's always the danger for us. Here you are at the end of another year of being saved. I don't know how well you did this year or how much progress you've made. But I know this - if you don't stick with Him, you can fall down the road and slide down the hill spiritually because it is a battle, and this isn't our home, and the enemy isn't your friend. And so we're supposed to be sheep in the midst of wolves, holding fast God's Word. So this chapter becomes the warning, I think, chapter at the end of book. It can be so good. It was so good - 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, first part of 13. Great chapters. Oh, man, revival. And then this. We have to be careful.

And so again, verse 25, "So I contended with them and cursed them," (come on, pastor, don't do that) "struck some of them and pulled out their hair," (oh, thank You, Lord - this is not politically correct, is it?) "and made them swear by God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves.'" Don't marry the heathen. Swear before God. It's a different culture where you can strike them and pull their hair and curse them. We're so tactful. Now we think this stuff, we just don't do it. Don't we? Oh, God. We hate to confront people. The word "contend" is everywhere. "I contended with the rulers, I contended with the men of Tyre, I contended with the guys hanging at the door, I contended with the nobles, I went after the priests, I told them to get their jobs done." Now he's going after the general population here, if you will. And I watch, and no wonder he keeps saying, "LORD, remember this." No one likes to take a stand. I'm amazed at how many times we get a call from someone who says, "Hey, Pastor, I want you to know so-and-so's really having a hard time. I think they're livin' in sin, man." And they want to tell me! And I always say, "Well, stop. Because they're not here, and I don't want to take any accusations. But if you know somethin' about it, go talk to them yourself. I don't want to know. I want to think the best of everyone. You go tell them." "Oh, Pastor, you should do that. That's your job." Really? I looked at the resume, and it wasn't on there. So afraid of losing a friend rather than winning a soul. Sometimes you've just got to step it up and be a good friend. I thought about Nathan having been sent by the LORD to go confront David the king over his sin with Bathsheba. And it had been well over a year, and he thought he'd gotten away with it, and yet the LORD knew. And Nathan kind of backed into his discussion with him and said, "Well, let me tell you a story," and he kind of hid the fact it was

David in the story. And David got so angry at the injustice of the man in the story, and then Nathan could finally say, "Well, that's you!" But I don't think he really wanted to be there. Jesus took this unique approach in His earthly ministry. At the very beginning of His ministry, He went to the Temple and got rid of the vendors (in John 2), and He did it again at the end of His ministry (in Matthew 21). "This is still not to be a den of thieves. This is a house of prayer." I know you don't ever want to hurt someone's feelings, but I'll tell you what - if their spiritual life is at stake, it might be worthwhile to just be a good friend and say so. Jesus said maybe one of the most radical statements in the Sermon on the Mount. He said (Matthew 5:29), "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell." Pretty dramatic statement, but it stresses the importance of the important and the need for us to encourage one another. So, Nehemiah was just beside himself, and he saw the consequences in the families, he saw what the people were doing. He let them know, in no uncertain terms, this was not acceptable. He let them know in a cultural way that they could relate to. We kind of laugh, but I'm sure My dad used to grab me sometimes by the hair. It worked on me. I don't know.

And then he says this to these folks, verse 26, "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin." Nehemiah argues with them besides manhandling them. He said, "Look, the Bible's filled with examples. And even those much favored like Solomon, who was made by the LORD wiser than any man who had ever lived, even he was able to fall in this area of not obeying the LORD." And so he felt it was time for this righteous indignation. He wasn't going to take these things too lightly. Solomon had great wisdom, and yet he fell into sin. He wrote to his son in Proverbs 6 about the danger of these foreign women getting and weaseling in on his life and how that relationship could turn him away from God. He wrote it very clearly in a whole chapter to his son. "Separate from the world. Don't be unequally yoked. Marry only in the Lord." The Bible's filled with "separate yourself." When it comes to spiritual things, put that first. But it wasn't happening.

We are told, in verse 27, "Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women? And one of the sons of Joiada the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I drove him from me." The priest's son had now married this

other perennial enemy. We read about Sanballat, you might remember, when we started the book. His daughter. So now there's another relationship with the world, and it's at the top of the spiritual leadership chain, if you will; the high priest's house, there, now these heathen relationships that are just corrupting from the top down. Nehemiah, in true form, chases the guy out of town. Nehemiah's a busy guy. He's confronting, he's contending, he's cursing, he's hair-pulling, he's threatening, he's striking some. All in a day's work, apparently. But God give us some more people with this kind of passion for Jesus.

And then, verse 29, "Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service, and to bringing the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times." And, for the fourth time, "Remember me, O my God, for good!" Verse 14, 22, 29, 31, "Remember me for good!" What a tough job he had! What a tough calling.

Nehemiah has some great lessons for us. The reconstruction of the wall after years of neglect because one man had a heart for God and wanted to make a change in his culture. And he did. He changed absolutely a generation of people. Seven chapters of reinstruction of the people - most of it good. Chapter 13 is the warning that's kind of attached to the end and the drastic steps that are sometimes necessary to keep us from that place of loss and keep us in that place of blessing for years to come. And historically, the next generation or so did well before they kind of went back down the hill again.

Learn this. You've got to stay in the hunt until the Lord comes. Right? You have to stay with it. It doesn't take long to see things deteriorate. I don't know how long Nehemiah was gone. If you ask me, I'd say maybe he was gone ten years. It's a long time. Moses was only gone forty days when all hell broke loose in the valley, and the people are worshipping the calves that they were used to worshipping. I'm always concerned about, and we hear about sometimes, pastors that take off for months at a time and leave their church and travel for Jesus while their church is just not led. It's terrible. I think it's a terrible idea.

But, anyway, notice that when Nehemiah returned, there was a tremendous respect for Nehemiah that there really wasn't for the people that he left behind for some reason. And so it might not have been his choice to leave, but he was under

authority as well. But as he came back, so did the people. So there is this warning to be careful where you stand. If you read Revelation 2 and 3 and Jesus' letters to the seven churches, one of the things you walk away with thinking about is that it does seem to be easy to walk away. Without daily diligence, there's no guarantee that you're going to continue to do well. And like Tobiah last time, and this fellow Sanballat this time, there's always this enemy's plan to worm into your life. The Lord isn't kidding when He said "Come out from among them and be separate." There's great safety in the church, I think. There is great difficulty and danger in the world if that's who you surround yourself with all the time. And if you go to your job every day or if you're in school, especially if you're in college these days, you can surround yourself with just such junk. You really need the body. Right? You need to run in and get cleansed and filled and encouraged. Don't stay out there. If there's any furniture cluttering the temple of God in your life, then it needs to go. Put it back out at the curb. Maybe there's a Delilah looking to steal your spiritual strength. But, if nothing else, walk away from chapter 13 saying, "Drastic measures are necessary to bring life." And Nehemiah was faithful to the end. And remember what he said four times? "Remember me, O LORD"? Twenty-five hundred years later, here you are reading about his life and looking to follow his example. So.....good book.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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