

Nehemiah: Stoking the Fire

INTRO: General William Booth was the founder of the Salvation Army. He told a group of young recruits, “I want you young men always to bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed.”

As we close our study in Nehemiah, we see that Nehemiah goes away for a period of time - seemingly a long period. When he returns, he finds that the fire of devotion that was burning so brightly has choked itself out in multiple ways. It means that the people of Jerusalem were sinners. I have news for you, the people of God in all times are sinners. Which means, there are sinners in this room here today. You might be sitting next to one and not even know it! Chances are, you are one.

What this shows us is that even the people of God who have had God do amazing things for us have a tendency to drift in our walk with God. The old hymn, “prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love...” And if Nehemiah 13 is any indication, we have a tendency to drift back to some of the same sins we struggled with in the past.

What this really displays for us is the grace and mercy of God. God brings the Jews out of exile from Persia and helps them get their city back, and helps them clean up their act by giving them the law all over again. The people say, “Yes and Amen” to the law. And years later, Nehemiah finds them in the same sins they said they would not do. We, as the children of God, cleansed by the blood of Christ, adopted into God’s family as full sons and daughters of God, witnesses to many of God’s amazing gracious acts, and yet we fall back to the sins we have desired to walk away from.

TRAN: So this is what we will look at today. Seems like Nehemiah ends on a low note, but the reality is, it is a great reminder of the grace of God. That is the highest note you can end on!

Nehemiah 13:4-31

- I. We are jumping over 13:1-3
 - A. They really belonged in the last sermon on Nehemiah as a part of the purification of the Temple
 - B. In essence what they say is that while they were purifying the Temple, they realized that Ammonites and Moabites were not allowed in as God commanded because Ammon and Moab would not give the Israelites food and water years ago
 - C. So in the process of cleansing the Temple, they excluded these people from the Temple

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- II. Eliashib the priest was closely associated with Tobiah 13:4-9
 - A. We did not make a huge deal out of this, but do you remember when we talked about Nehemiah's enemies trying to trick Nehemiah into running to the Temple for protection?
 - 1. They wanted to discredit Nehemiah so the work would stop on the wall
 - 2. Tobiah is the one that hired the false prophet to try to trick Nehemiah
 - 3. And here we have the priest in close association with Tobiah
 - B. Eliashib gave Tobiah a room in the Temple storehouse
 - 1. Which tells us that the Temple storehouse was not full as it should have been
 - 2. That means the people were not bringing their tithes and offerings to the Temple
 - C. What we are seeing here is one of the ways in which historically the people of God are prone to drift over time - we become less serious about holiness
 - 1. We did a long series on holiness little over a year ago
 - 2. Over time, we allow things into our lives that do not help shape us into the people God desires, but away from God
 - a) And most of the time, it is things that are morally neutral
 - (1) There is nothing wrong with the things we allow, except that they are not driving us toward Christ
 - (2) That can be stuff, activities, or even relationships
 - (a) You would think that a priest would have a better affect on Tobiah
 - (b) Instead it is the other way around
 - b) Most of us do not struggle with things that are overtly morally wrong
 - (1) We have few who struggle with addictions
 - (2) What we do struggle with is something that is morally neutral, but drives us away from God over time
 - (3) That something that robs us of our affection for Jesus
 - D. We fight this drift with two main things
 - 1. God's Word - that should be Christianity 101 - the Bible
 - 2. We fight these things with one another
 - a) We all have blind spots
 - b) The most gracious and loving thing I can do is help you see what is in your blind spot before it overtakes you and does damage to your life
 - c) And yet that is the thing that is done least among God's people
 - (1) Probably because it is hard
 - (2) I'm the pastor and I still have a hard time with it because usually it goes badly

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(3) I (hopefully) lovingly try to help them see where they may get blindsided, and get met with frustration, anger, accusations of not loving

d) I repeat, the most loving thing you can do for people is help them see blind spots in their lives within the context of relationship

III. The Levites - 13:10-14

A. So what is happening is the people had promised to take care of the house of God as God had commanded

1. In chapter 10 they said “We will not neglect the house of God!”

2. And yet they have neglected it

B. So much have they neglected it that the Levites had to leave to go take care of their families

C. When Nehemiah came back from his time in seeing the king, he rebuked the officials for not following the commands of God in not providing for the needs of the Levites

D. Here we can see another way in which historically the people of God drift from God over time, and that is in drifting from biblical authority

1. This makes sense in our day because in America we really only recognize one authority - ourselves

a) I even had one teen who, and I was just goofing around in what I told them to do, but they looked at me and said, “You’re not my dad!”

b) Which I guess it was good they recognized their dad as an authority, but that is the culture we live in - “You can’t tell me what to do”

2. There is very little respect for authority in America - some questioning if there should be authority at all

3. When you combine that with a lack of understanding of what the church is, you get something that puts people in danger in their spiritual lives

a) This harkens back to our series on elders and the church

b) How many of you join a church based on Hebrews 13:17 “Obey your leaders and submit to them...”

(1) That word “obey” sounds scary in some respects

(2) “Submit?” Seriously?

c) Here is how it balances out, the rest of the verse, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account.”

(1) If you think obeying and submitting is hard - and it is

(2) Try being the one that answers to God for your soul

(a) That’s my job

(b) We have not even gotten our church to a place where this has really the effect I would like to see

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- (c) A place where the elders are known, and they know the congregation - they are seeking to understand you, your life, and your spiritual needs so they can care for you
 - (d) We have a lot of work to get to that place - but it will be worth it
4. It is imperative that we are under authority in our spiritual lives
- a) For us that means joining a church
 - b) Saying, “This is where I want to commit my life to these people, and so they can commit their lives to me, and my growth and spiritual nourishment.”
 - c) The reality is, this “I love Jesus but not the church” has to stop
 - (1) “I love Jesus but I don’t need the church” - you need the church more than you know
 - (2) Even this church hopping thing, or multiple church thing - no
 - (3) This “I’ll attend, but not really commit”
 - (a) You know what that is - it is your way of remaining your own authority - your way of controlling things
 - (b) That way no one can get in your business
 - (c) What good is the church if we have no right to get in your business, and you have no right to get in ours?
 - (4) You need a body of believers that you can commit to, build into, and have them build into you
 - (5) And remember, there is no perfect church - this church is full of sinners
 - (a) And so is every church you have ever set foot in
 - (b) And that is good, because it helps us grow
- IV. The Sabbath day was being ignored - 13:15-22
- A. The next thing Nehemiah sees happening upon return is that people are buying and selling on the Sabbath
- 1. Nehemiah’s solution to this is to have the gates closed on Friday night (the start of Sabbath) and not opened again until Saturday night
 - 2. When some of the merchants from the surrounding area came and stayed at the gates, Nehemiah had a “creative” solution for that
 - a) Verse 21 puts it mildly, but the original text is different
 - b) It says, “If you do this again, I will put my hands on you.”
 - (1) I need to see if the Council will let me put that into the church constitution
 - (2) Do it again, I’ll put my hands on you

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- B. Another way we see God's people historically drift (and did you notice that Nehemiah says this happened years before him - history), another way we drift is doing rather than being
 - 1. The concept of Sabbath is lost on us nowadays
 - a) We are great at understanding work, and doing
 - b) We are lousy at understanding being
 - 2. We get excited at accomplishment
 - a) Get a good grade - want to bust out some more good grades
 - b) Any husbands ever do up the housework while your wife was gone, she comes home sees what you have done, you tell her about the other 10 things you did and you feel like you are husband of the year?
 - c) The problem is, we can let our identity get wrapped up in what we do
 - (1) Especially for us men - doing is how we describe ourselves
 - (2) "So what do you do"
 - (3) You want to freak a man out, ask him who he is - not his name, and not his job - tell me who you are
 - 3. So God built it in for us that once a week we could stop and be
 - a) Remind us that our identity is not in all the work and accomplishments
 - b) Remind us that we are His child and THAT defines us
 - c) We all struggle with this one
 - (1) I get caught up in the doing side of ministry I forget to be
 - (2) I have asked a friend to keep me accountable to taking a half day away from the office to just be - be with God, in His Word, in prayer, in worship
 - 4. This spills over into how we feel accepted by God
 - a) We have to do - we have to clean ourselves up to be accepted by Him
 - b) We struggle to see that we are simply accepted because of what God has done for us
- V. Finally marriages had gotten mixed - 13:23-31
 - A. Now first, please don't think that Nehemiah's way of handling things is the model for ministry or life
 - 1. Don't make this your life verse
 - 2. As much as I might like to smack some people who step out of line and then claim, "Hey, it's biblical!" - probably not the best way to handle things
 - B. This section is all about the marriages
 - 1. The weird thing is, we get through this section, and then the book is finished

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2. It's kind of a strange ending to an otherwise uplifting story
3. We'll talk more about that in a minute
- C. This fourth drift is that we get near-sighted and lazy about the things of God
 1. This text talks about marriage, which was the problem at that time for them
 - a) This text has historically been used to support no interracial marriage
 - b) How they got that out of here I will never know
 - (1) It is a poor hermeneutic to pull that out of this text
 - (2) It does talk about not having mixed marriages, but not because of race
 2. What this text is about is inviting cultures into your life that are opposed to the things of God
 - a) So here's what happens in our time - male or female, but it may be more true of women than men
 - (1) They grow up, they start to see their friends get married and loneliness sets in
 - (2) They start to date a nice guy, but he is not a man in love with Jesus
 - (3) Eventually they get married
 - b) The near-sightedness comes in because now the kids come along
 - (1) How are we raising them
 - (2) How is the spiritual temperature going to get set properly when dad and mom are not on the same page
 - (3) What about moral values set in the house
 - (a) About money - are we generous or just seeking the next step up?
 - (b) Will our family declare God's glory, are we raising our kids to be godly?
 - c) "But Pastor Keith, finding a quality man or woman is hard!"
 - (1) Yes and Amen - I feel your pain
 - (2) They are hard to find - but they are so worth the wait
 - d) "But Pastor Keith, he's sooo cute!"
 - (1) Great!
 - (a) This is part of the shortsightedness
 - (b) That we look at the packaging and ignore the content
 - (2) But cuteness wears thin
 - (a) The verse about wives applies to the men as well
 - (b) "Charm is deceitful, beauty is vain, but a spouse that honors the Lord is to be praised."

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- (c) My roommate in college and I had a wall of quotes as we went through school
 - i) One of the quotes we found said this (I'll amend it slightly):
“Marrying someone for their looks is like buying house for the paint.”
 - ii) What happens to paint? It cracks, it chips, it wears over time
- e) Let me give you two illustrations of short sighted vs long sighted
 - (1) First, you have the opportunity to take a new job in which you will make more money, but it means leaving your church in which you are growing; there is life, there are relationships built that will not be easily replaced
 - (a) It is short sighted to think only about the money or the advance in your career
 - (b) You have not looked further down the road of what it may do to your family, and your spiritual health
 - (c) We don't usually think this way in our society
 - i) A job for more money - of course you should take it!
 - ii) Without a single thought to spiritual well being
 - iii) That is looking only at the cash, and not your spiritual health
 - (2) Second, the use of our time
 - (a) We all have commitments coming out our ears so we want to be wise in how we use our time
 - i) The Bible even tells us to “redeem our time for the days are evil”
 - (b) The short view of commitments and time looks at how we can pack in as much as we possibly can
 - i) We have kids and grand kids
 - ii) We have jobs
 - iii) We have family events
 - iv) We have fun activities we want to squeeze in there any way we can
 - v) But in the midst of the short view, God becomes an appendage to the schedule; something we add in as we have time
 - (c) The long view of time and commitments fully recognizes these commitments but places God at the head of the line

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- i) For some that means an understanding that placing God at the head of the line will affect how we interact with all these other commitments
 - ii) For others, it may mean having to sacrifice being committed elsewhere so we can attend to our spiritual health
 - iii) Whatever way you slice it, the long view recognizes the supreme importance of our spiritual lives and health
 - (1) Not just for us alone
 - (2) But for our families, and for the people around us
3. The short view in all aspects of life does not really take spiritual health into account
 - a) Sadly, the short view is what gets taught, modeled and accepted
 - b) The long view is the view that keeps in mind the important things of life, but looks down the road to spiritual health and well being
 - (1) The how will this decision affect my spiritual life
 - (2) How will this affect the spiritual life of my kids and my grandkids or people around me
 - c) I challenge you to re-shape your view of life from a short view to a long view of life

VI. Conclusion

- A. Nehemiah ends in a strange fashion
 1. Nehemiah comes back from a trip, seems to give everyone a whoopin' and then the book is done
 2. But I think this is by design
- B. I hate perfect Christians - they drive me nuts - because I'm not a perfect Christian
- C. I think God ends Nehemiah this way to bring us encouragement
 1. Yes, we have a tendency to drift from God
 - a) We can get all cozy with Him
 - b) We can commit ourselves to all the right things and still drift
 2. Even when we drift, there is grace that says, "Let's go back"
 - a) And the grace from God that says, "Welcome home."
 - b) You cannot drift so far from God that He will not welcome you home
 - c) There may be a whoopin' in it spiritually speaking, but there is grace to return
- D. Maybe there are some of you that need to return
 1. Maybe you have drifted from God
 2. Come home
 3. The grace of God bids you to come home