



Finer Grounds

Nehemiah

Lesson 13: Nehemiah 13

Well, we have come to the end of our study in Nehemiah. As we draw to a close, I highly encourage you to read the entire book in one sitting. We have covered so much material, and one last read-through will really help to bring Nehemiah's main theme of restoration more clearly into focus. One Bible study technique that is sometimes helpful is to underline or highlight repeating words that seem to be used in a significant way. Now, just because a word is repeated over and over again doesn't necessarily mean it is a thematic word. For example, the word "the" occurs 803 times in Nehemiah, but it doesn't necessarily mean there is theological significance to every time "the" pops up.

As you read through the entire book, underline or highlight every occurrence of the word "remember." How does this word connect to main themes in the book like restoration and leadership, (especially in chapter 13)?

When you look closely, it becomes clear that Nehemiah is a book where the concept of "memory" is very significant. Nehemiah purposely uses this word in two primary ways. First, there is the memory problem that God's people often have. It was their failure to "remember" that brought them into Babylonian captivity (cf. 9:17). It was in a moment of fear and discouragement that Nehemiah had to quickly motivate his peers to "remember" that God was

fighting for them (cf. 4:14). As God's people, the reason we get into trouble and start to drift away from Him is because we have a memory problem. On the other hand, we have God's memory, and this is the second and most significant way Nehemiah utilizes the term "remember." Unlike us, God never forgets, and that should bring us tremendous comfort. God never forgets the promises He made to us no matter how long ago it was (cf. 1:8). Sometimes we will reach out and help people in benevolent ways (i.e. Nehemiah rescuing the poor Jews from the oppression of the rich in chapter 5).

Even though as time passes, and the gratitude of those we helped diminishes, God never forgets (cf. 5:19). Sometimes we will pour ourselves out to ensure that God's house (for Nehemiah the temple, but for us the church) functions properly and thrives. Even though the rest of the people may be ungrateful, it's comforting to know God remembers (cf. 13:14, 31). God will always remember the times we face opposition from the world, and they will not get away with it (cf. 6:10-14). Likewise, God will always remember when face opposition even from within His covenant people (cf. 13:15-22). When Nehemiah cries out in prayer, appealing to God to "remember" him, he is not demonstrating a self-righteous attitude. Instead, it is a demonstration of faith during times of difficulty and discouragement for a faithful servant who rarely receives the appropriate response from the people around him. On this theme of memory, Nehemiah is a book that offers us both comfort as well as a challenge: God



Finer Grounds

knows, and He will always remember us... but will we remember Him?

Read Nehemiah 13:15-22.

What offense are the Jews committing and why is this such a serious violation of God's will?

According to the text, what does Nehemiah do in response? It may be helpful here to highlight or underline all the action words used to describe Nehemiah's response.

Why do you think this specific issue continues to be a problem for God's people?

Remember that this section of text is a continuation of 13:1-14. Nehemiah had been away in Babylon to give a report to the King, and he had just recently returned. Although we don't have an exact timeline of events, we know for sure he returned to Babylon in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes reign (13:6). This was twelve years after Nehemiah had originally set out from Susa to restore Jerusalem and spiritual order to God's people (cf. 2:1). Think of how frustrating it must have been from Nehemiah's perspective that, in such a short period of time, God's people had already started to disregard His will regarding His Sabbath. No good leader enjoys having to rebuke

and correct others constantly. However, that's all Nehemiah seems to do in the remainder of chapter 13. It might be tempting for us to think, "What's the big deal? These people are just trying to provide for themselves and make a living. Nehemiah just needs to get off his legalistic high-horse." Working and allowing trade on a Saturday may seem like a minor issue on the surface. It's just the weekend, and it's not like they're doing anything particularly "evil" or offensive by our standards.

If we were to frame this from the perspective of many misguided Christians today we might hear something like, "Being a child of God is so much more than observing something one day out of the week, we need to stop focusing so much on what we do/don't do on one 'special day' and be more concerned about the things God really cares about..." There are certainly many Jews who misunderstood God's commands regarding the Sabbath, and treated that day as a ritualistic checklist (the Pharisees come to mind). However, Nehemiah isn't upset that the people aren't going through the motions of simply not working on the Sabbath. He is outraged (and rightly so) at the lack of reverence and honor the people are showing to God.

They are so wrapped up in their love of the world, and what this life has to offer, that they are pushing God out of the picture by their abuse of the Sabbath. In addition to restoring the form and function of spirituality in Jerusalem, Nehemiah sought to restore the heart of the people back toward God. The Sabbath observance was never intended as merely a once-a-week checklist, it was set aside as a time for the people to refocus their hearts on their God.



Finer Grounds

In Nehemiah 13:16-17 we see that foreigners were still living in Jerusalem. What is Nehemiah’s response, and why does he make such a big deal about this?

In addition to working and selling goods on the Sabbath, the Jews had allowed foreigners back into the city to live. In the first half of chapter 13 we learned about the consequences of having a non-Jewish influence within the spiritual structure of God’s people. However, as Nehemiah points out in verse 18, their ancestors made the same mistakes. These Jews are beginning to repeat the sins that brought the people into captivity in the first place.

It’s just like the phrase coined by George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” (The Life of Reason). The purpose for separating themselves from foreigners in Jerusalem, and their influence on the Sabbath, was never intended to create a mindset of racist elitism among the Jews. God wanted this separation to reinforce His holiness in the hearts of the Jews. God wanted their worship to be set apart from the rest of the world. He wanted His people to prioritize their lives properly. By allowing work and foreign trade to occur on the Sabbath they let the world slowly turn their priorities away from God.

Just like the Jews, we can easily repeat the same mistakes today. The influence of the world continually knocks on the doors of our hearts, but we can’t allow it to shift our priorities. What do we communicate to God when we regularly prioritize our jobs or recreational activities over

His requested worship gathering of His children on the Lord’s Day? What do we communicate to our families and children when we schedule all-day boating trips at the lake on Sundays? What mindset do we instill in our children when we yield to the world and allow them to play in soccer games during instead of gathering to offer God sacrifices worthy of His name? What do we communicate to the Lord when we are just too tired to go to worship because we stayed up all night binge watching our favorite Netflix series? It says to God that He has been removed from number one in our hearts to second, third, or maybe fourth place.

God didn’t establish His commands to be a tyrant. He set them in place with reason and purpose. The Jews disregarded His well-planned instructions too quickly after Nehemiah had restored them. We need to question our motives and examine our hearts when it comes to observing God’s commands. We need to communicate to God through our actions that we are thrilled to be a part of His plans, instead of trying to force Him to tag along as we pursue our plans.

Read Nehemiah 13:23-29.

What immediate consequence did marrying foreigners have on the people according to the text?

According to the text, how does Nehemiah respond?



Finer Grounds

Is his response justified?

It is so frustrating to watch God’s people repeat mistakes over and over again, and yet here is another example. The Jews do exactly what they swore they wouldn’t do. Do you remember the sealed document the leaders of the people signed in Nehemiah 10? The spiritual and social leaders made an oath to uphold God’s commandments. Specifically, in Nehemiah 10:30, they promised to separate themselves from marrying foreigners. Yet they so quickly forgot the oath they signed, and they have already started compromising their foundations of their faith for the temptations of the world.

In verse 24, we see that the influence is affecting the next generation and their ability to speak and understand the language of Judah (i.e. Hebrew). Okay, so what? Hebrew wasn’t the only language the Jews were allowed to speak was it? Well no, but we need to understand the implications for the Jews not understanding the language at all. God’s will for them was written in Hebrew. The history of God’s people was recorded in Hebrew. The priests read from the Law in Hebrew, the Levites led worship in Hebrew. Think about how disconnected the next generation would be, if they couldn’t understand the language of God’s covenant people.

Let’s carry over some of the application for us today. Today, do we see instances where some who were “brought up in Christian homes” but

they are unable to speak or understand language that is pertinent to God’s people? Think of several examples.

Thankfully we live in an age of convenience, and God’s Scriptures are available in many different languages. We also recognize how important it is for new, faithful translations of God’s word to be offered so that we can best understand His will for us as language evolves. I’m not talking about the need to update our Bible translations, or to drop some of the “eths” in our worship songs in each generation (we do!). What I’m saying is there is sometimes a disconnect with some in the church who are incapable of speaking and understanding the concepts essential to our relationship with God. How many in the church have no real grasp on how a covenant works, what it means to be sanctified, what the church is, or what the process of repentance looks like? Without exposure, training, and practice it can be incredibly difficult to read and comprehend God’s word. If we allow the world to shape the spiritual environment of our homes we will continue to see people who, not only don’t grasp the teachings of God’s word, but are also prone to changing and twisting the Scriptures to fit their own agenda. The state of God’s people begins and ends in the home.

Nehemiah’s response to the people about who had married foreigners is certainly harsh and we might say “an excessive use of force” (Nehemiah 13:25-28). He became physical with some and even banished the son of the high priest Eliashib. The corruption and foreign political influence ran too deep, and Nehemiah snapped.

This brings us back to our question; was this strong of a reaction justified? Although we may



Finer Grounds

be tempted to equate this to Jesus driving money changers out of the temple with a scourge in John chapter 2, Nehemiah seems to go even beyond the righteous anger shown by Jesus (you know...yanking them around by their hair and landing blows on them). It's helpful to remember that Nehemiah, like all of God's leaders, is human. He's not perfect or sinless, and this passage probably isn't preserved in Scripture to give us divine authority to get physically violent with Christians who stray from the truth. What this passage does show us is a faithful man of God who has worked so hard, and given so much to help his brethren, who seems to reach a breaking point. This is Nehemiah's impassioned response to a stubborn people who continually refuse to follow God.

In verse 26, why does Nehemiah bring up Solomon as a negative example? What's the significance in Nehemiah contrasting the blessings Solomon had with his spiritual downfall?

Of all the people in Israel's history who truly "had it made," Solomon is at the very top of the list. God blessed him with a strong, united kingdom. Solomon was raised by a father who is forever remembered as "the man after God's own heart." He was blessed with unsurpassed wisdom, wealth, and influence. Most importantly, he was loved by God. However, in spite of all God's blessings, Solomon allowed sin to take over his life through his many marriages to these foreign wives. Nehemiah wants his brethren to see that if Solomon was not immune to the influence of the world, they certainly will follow in his footsteps if they disobey God and intermarry with unbelievers.

Read Nehemiah 13:30-31.

Why is this a fitting way for Nehemiah to end his historical account?

What does he mean when he prays "remember me, O my God, for good,"?

Aside from briefly mentioning his restoration of the wood supply necessary for the sacrifices, these last two verses serve as sort of a summary statement and conclusion. Everything he has done up to this point in the book can fit into the statements "Thus I purified them from everything foreign" and that he "appointed duties for the priests and the Levites." From rebuilding the wall to all of the spiritual restorations, Nehemiah has been faithful to his charge. When Nehemiah prays that God remember him "for good," he is not saying, "Remember me forever." The Hebrew word for "good" here refers to a "moral goodness" (Harris, 345).

The final words of his prayer is that God will remember that Nehemiah gave his all to do what was right in God's eyes to restore God's people to Him. Regardless of how he will be remembered by his own people (do you think the people he just ripped hair out of will have fond memories of his leadership?), Nehemiah finds relief and comfort knowing that God will never forget his consistent obedience coupled with his sincere intentions. In the end, what God remembers about how we lived our lives is all that really matters. What will He remember about you and me?



Finer Grounds

Works Cited

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