

When the Cat's Away ...

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from **Jerry Vines Ministries**
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Let's Begin

If Nehemiah had been looking for a good place to end his book, chapter 12 would certainly have been it. The wall of Jerusalem had been rebuilt. The people had consecrated themselves to obey and serve the Lord. They were so excited about all the Lord had done and was doing for them that when they dedicated the wall, their joyful sound was heard afar off (12:43). But chapter 12 does not conclude Nehemiah's book. Instead, Nehemiah 13 is the final chapter. It is a chapter filled with numerous difficulties as Nehemiah is forced to make some unpleasant confrontations.

We have all heard the little rhyme, "When the cat's away, the mice will play." A follow-up to that, regarding the church of Jesus

Christ, says, "When the preacher's away, the people will stray." As the hymn writer of "Come Thou Fount" wrote years ago, we are all prone to wander and leave the Lord we love. A strong spiritual leader's presence can make a difference in a home, a church, and even in a nation. We see this truth in our lesson today. Let's use the outline below and see what happens to the children of Israel when Nehemiah is not there and the lessons chapter 13 has for us today.

I. The Obeying of God's Book (13:1-3)

II. The Cleansing of God's House (13:4-14)

III. The Restoring of God's Day (13:15-22)

IV. The Accepting of God's Way (13:23-31)

I. The Obeying of God's Book (13:1-3)

The good news as we begin to read chapter 13 is that the children of Israel are still reading God's Word (v. 1). That's always a hopeful sign. When we read the Word of God, we are able to find out what God says about different matters. At this time, the people find out the Ammonites and the Moabites were not to come into the congregation of God forever. This decision was based on their treatment of the children of

Israel when Israel left Egypt and journeyed in the wilderness (v. 2; cp. Num. 22-24).

The people are quick to obey and separate themselves from "the mixed multitude" (v. 3). This would have included the Ammonites and Moabites. The Jews understood there was to be a distinction between the people of God and the people of the world.

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Reflection Connection

Read James 1:22 and discuss why it is important to be not just a hearer of God's Word but also a doer of it.



II. The Cleansing of God's House (13:4-14)

The bad news of chapter 13 begins in verse 4. Just as Nehemiah had told King Artaxerxes he would do, Nehemiah returned to Babylon after the wall of Jerusalem was completed (cp. 2:6; 13:6). While he was gone, Eliashib who was the high priest at the time and supervised the storerooms of the temple, “allied” with Tobiah. If we have forgotten who Tobiah was, he, along with Sanballat and Geshem, was an avowed enemy of the people of God. He had given himself to the destruction of God's work and had tried every way possible to hinder the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall (cp. 2:10, 19; 4:7; 6:10-14, 17-19).

Eliashib not only allies with Tobiah, but he prepares him a large room right in the temple (v. 5). He lets Tobiah move into the room where the different offerings had previously been stored. Consider the extremes we see so quickly in this chapter. The people understand the Ammonites and Moabites were not allowed to enter the congregation, but then their high priest allows Tobiah, an Ammonite (cp. 2:10), to have a room in the house of their God. His desecration reminds us of the devil's subtlety. We can only imagine the excuses Eliashib gave for his actions. At the same time, we need to ask ourselves if we have allowed a “Tobiah” into the

sacred regions of our hearts. Is there anything in our lives that keeps the Lord Jesus Christ from having His rightful place in our heart? Are we willingly compromising with this world as we live our Christian lives?

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Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem and finds out what Eliashib has done (vv. 6-7). We can almost imagine the shock he felt when he realizes what has taken place. The people had signed their names to a covenant to be faithful and true unto the Lord. Now, one of the men who should have led the people in their faithfulness to the Lord was instead leading the way in disobedience.

Nehemiah wastes no time calling Eliashib's actions “evil.” He was not afraid to call sin sin. He says in verse 8, “And it grieved me sore.” He was extremely upset. Everyone else seemed to have accepted a heathen living in the house of Israel's God,

but Nehemiah was not going to accept it. He throws all of Tobiah's belongings out of the room. He doesn't stop there. Nehemiah then orders the room to be cleansed or purified so the utensils and offerings for the temple can be brought back to their rightful storage room.

Nehemiah's actions remind us of what the Lord Jesus did when He went into the temple during His earthly ministry. When He saw the money changers and merchandise, He took a whip and drove them out of the temple (John 2:13-16). Both of their actions remind us that it is not wrong to get angry at sin. In fact, we need to get angry at sin, especially when it is within the church. What Eliashib and Tobiah had done was not against Nehemiah personally, but it was against his God. Because of this, he is filled with a righteous indignation and wastes no time correcting the evil.

Nehemiah was wise enough to know that if a spiritual leader was living a compromising life, others were also. In verse 10 he finds out the Levites, who normally served in the temple, had gone to work in their fields. They were forced to do this because the people had not been faithful in their giving.

What does Nehemiah do about this? He confronts the leadership. Verse 11, “Then I contended with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken? ...” The rulers were supposed to



set the example in living for the Lord. He wants an answer from them, but they have no answer for him. He sets things right by calling the Levites back to their proper duties. As soon as the Levites return to Jerusalem, the people begin bringing their tithes back to the storehouse (v. 10). To ensure the Levites are provided for and do not have to return to their fields again, Nehemiah also appoints treasurers over the storehouses (v. 11).

It is interesting to note how Eliashib's sin of allowing Tobiah to move into a storeroom of the temple resulted in the people sinning by no longer bringing their tithes and offerings to the temple. That resulted in the Levites likewise sinning by leaving their place of service. This is a reminder that one person's disobedience does matter. Our sins affect others. At the same

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time, our obedience influences others too. After Nehemiah evicts Tobiah and restores the storehouse, the people begin giving again and the Levites return to their place of service.

Reflection Connection

Read Matthew 18:15-17 and Galatians 6:1 and discuss how believers should handle sin within the fellowship of believers today.

Verse 14 lets us know that while Nehemiah was tough on the outside as he dealt with sin, he was tender on the inside. He prays, "Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for the offices thereof." He's not bragging to the people about what a good guy he is; instead, he's alone with God. He is talking to God in the midst of these difficulties.

III. The Restoring of God's Day (13:15-22)

Nehemiah continues to see sin among the people, and this time it is regarding their Sabbath (v. 15). Not only were the people involved in selling and buying on the Sabbath, but outsiders were coming in to Jerusalem to sell their merchandise (v. 16). Not that long ago, the people had committed themselves to keep the Sabbath day holy. They had been so serious about it that they made a holy covenant and signed their names to it (9:38). What happened to their commitment?

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knew it, the Sabbath was being treated just like any other day of the week. That's what has

happened in America. While we do not observe Saturday as our "Sabbath" day, there was a time when Sunday was regarded as "the Lord's day" across our country. Now it is just part of the weekend. It is just another day. Slowly the sacred things in our country have become common and mundane.

Nehemiah responds by contending with the nobles of Judah (v. 17). Jerusalem was in the confines of the tribe of Judah.



Because of this, Nehemiah holds them responsible for what was happening. The nobles possibly thought they were getting ahead financially with the buying and selling going on each Sabbath day. We need to understand that we never truly gain when we disobey God's Word. Nehemiah reminds them how their nation had suffered because their ancestors had disobeyed God's Word regarding the Sabbath (v. 18). He also wants them to consider their future, "... yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath." He didn't want God to have to chasten them again because of this sin.

Nehemiah takes control to be sure the Sabbath is kept holy. He commands the gates of the city to be closed right before the Sabbath began. They were then not to be opened again until after the Sabbath ended (v. 19). And as an added precaution, he stations his own servants at the gates to be sure the gates stay closed.

Some of the merchants did not realize how serious Nehemiah was. They camped outside the city walls a couple of times, possibly waiting to see if Nehemiah would relent (v. 20). He was not afraid to confront them either. In verse 21 he asks them what they were doing and then threatens

to arrest them if they didn't go away. They knew he meant business. Verse 21 concludes, "From that time forth came they no more on the Sabbath."

Nehemiah once again goes to the Levites. He commands them to purify themselves and then guard the gates (v. 22). As servants of the Lord, they also had the responsibility for keeping the Sabbath holy.

Reflection Connection

Although Christians are not commanded to observe the Sabbath, discuss why and how Sunday, the Lord's Day, should be special to us.

IV. The Accepting of God's Way (13:23-31)

The children of Israel not only had problems in the house of God and in the market place, they also had problems in the family. God had specifically said there was to be no intermarriage between the Hebrews and the nations around them (cp. Deut. 7:1-4). This was not a racial issue, but rather a spiritual issue. They were different and had nothing in common with the other nations.

Nehemiah looks around and realizes the Jews had disobeyed the Word of God in that area too (v. 23). Even worse, "And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could

not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people" (v. 24). That means the children could speak

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their other parent's language, but they couldn't speak Hebrew. If the children couldn't speak

Hebrew, they couldn't read the Bible. They knew the language of the world, but they didn't know the language of faith.

For the third time in this chapter, Nehemiah contends or confronts the people. Verse 25, "And I contended with them and cursed them ..." This doesn't mean he used profanity, but he pronounces a curse on them in the name of the Lord. He doesn't stop there. He also "... smote certain of them and plucked off their hair ..." (v. 25b). He was showing utter contempt for what they had done. He then makes them swear to no longer give their children in marriage and reminds them of Solomon's sin in verse 26. As great a king as Solomon was, his foreign wives led him away from his God and



into sin (cp. 1 Kings 11:1-13). Nehemiah pleads with the people to realize the seriousness of their sin (v. 27).

Verse 28 shows us how rampant the sin of intermarrying was, “And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib, the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat; therefore I chased him from me.” One of Eliashib’s own grandsons had married a pagan wife. She was not just any pagan, but she was Sanballat’s daughter. Just like Tobiah, Sanballat was an enemy of the Jews. This may also explain why so many of the people had intermarried. Their own high priest had set the example.

Nehemiah prays again in verse 29. This time instead of “remember me,” it is “Remember them, O my God.” He understood the seriousness of what the high priest and other leaders had done (cp. Lev. 21:6-8, 14-15). Instead of realizing the honor of their offices, they had defiled them. Nehemiah removes everyone who was not qualified and then makes sure the qualified knew what his job assignment was (vv. 30-31a). He puts things back in order.

Reflection Connection

Discuss why it is so important for leaders within the church to live blameless lives.

Wrap Up

The book of Nehemiah ends with Nehemiah praying, “Remember me, O my God, for good” (13:31b). He had stood on his feet without compromise, but he had also bowed on his knees and committed all he had done to God. Because of his example and influence, Nehemiah continually led others to serve and obey the Lord. Let’s commit today to follow his example!

