

“Fade to Black” // Nehemiah 10–13 // Nehemiah # 8¹

Announcement

“More dancing and more ice cream.” Amen to that! That’s CJ, one of our Summit kids, on behalf of all of us saying Happy Mother’s Day! Watching that I kept thinking, “In about 30 years I think that kid might have my job!”

Whether it’s ice cream or some other treat, I hope your family really spoils you today. We do want to honor you on this day, and we recognize the incredible impact you’ve made on us and all the sacrifices you endured to make that happen. As someone who lost his mother just a few years ago, I’m realizing just how profoundly shaping her influence on my life was.

But let me also say this: I know Mother’s Day can be a difficult day for some, for many reasons. And if that’s you, I just want you to know that we see you and we love you—and I know it takes some courage even to come out to church on a day like today, but I’m so glad you did.

Introduction

And so one last time, if you would, open your Bibles to **Nehemiah** and find chapter **13**. This is our last week in the book of Nehemiah, which makes me a little sad because I’ve really enjoyed the book. How about you?

Think with me, as you turn there to Nehemiah 13, about terrible endings to terrific stories. From my childhood, **the SEINFELD finale remains one of TV’s most divisive endings**. Instead of a heartfelt sendoff, George, Elaine, Jerry, and Cramer end up jailed for violating the Good Samaritan law in a local town, and past characters from the show like Abu and (!) Newman (!) come testify before a jury about what jerks they were over the years. Fans expecting emotional closure and Jerry and Elaine to finally get together felt blindsided by the ending’s cold, ironic tone. Yet others—including Larry David himself—argued it was brilliantly self-consistent—a show about selfishness ending with isolation. So: anti-climactic letdown, or insightful, satirical self-reflection? The jury’s still out.

~~**The SOPRANOS ended with one of the most abrupt cuts in TV history:** Tony Soprano sitting in a diner, his neo-estranged daughter walks in, a strange man stands up and then—black screen, and silence. Viewers across the nation thought their TVs had malfunctioned. But that was it! The~~

¹ Sources consulted: Eric Mason, *Nehemiah for You*, (London, UK: The Good Book Company, 2022); Tim Mackie, “Ezra-Nehemiah - Session Four”, June 2, 2018, Seattle Area Pastors Network Conference; Don Carson, [“Leaning Forward in the Dark: A Failed Reformation”](#), June 28, 2014, The Gospel Coalition’s National Women’s Conference; Skip Heitzig, [“The Firm, but Loving Hand of Discipline”](#), August 31, 2005, Calvary Church; Skip Heitzig, [“United We Stand”](#), July 13, 2005, Calvary Church. And others as noted throughout.

~~end. People were furious at the lack of closure. Others considered it profound, however, arguing the ambiguity of the final scene brought the perfect conclusion to Tony's complicated, paranoid life.~~

More recently, people have been all up in arms over the conclusion of **STRANGER THINGS**. And don't worry, I'm not going to give any spoilers here if you haven't seen it. But the series finale, which came out on Dec 31., was SO BAD that people immediately assumed it was a parody episode and that the REAL finale was going to drop 24 hours later, on midnight, New Years Day. All over social media, people pointed to little hints in the last episode, hidden frames, that kind of stuff. People were doing live TikTok parties in preparation for the "real finale"... but then midnight came and went, and people realized that the terrible finale was actually the end.

I share that because Nehemiah 13 ranks up there with "most unsatisfying endings." And Nehemiah 13 ends not just the book of Nehemiah, of course, but also the entire Old Testament. As we've discussed, the events of the book of Nehemiah are the last recorded events of the Old Testament,² which means Nehemiah 13:31 closes out the timeline of the Old Testament.

It's abrupt, like *The Sopranos*, and when the final curtain falls, no one stands up to applaud. In fact, no one stood up, period, because no one was really even sure the show was actually over. People started slapping the side of their TVs, thinking they had malfunctioned. One guy in the back finally yells out, "Wait ... was that it?" And the manager sheepishly walks out on stage, hat in hand, and says, "I'm sorry, folks, that really was the end." And he holds up the script, showing you that we really have come to the last page. And then everyone starts booing and throwing tomatoes at him, and it becomes a whole thing.

This unfulfilling ending is intentional, however, because it sets up the greatest finale of all time; it paves the way for the ultimate Closer to stride onto the set a few hundred years later.

So one last time in our study of Nehemiah, can we all stand for the reading of God's Word? Nehemiah 13, beginning with **Vs 4:** This is the conclusion to the Old Testament:

Now Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah (Tobiah, remember him? He was one of Nehemiah's chief adversaries) 5 prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil... 6 While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king.

² Many say Malachi was written a few years later, but the events of Nehemiah are the last recorded historical events of the Old Testament.

And after some time I asked leave of the king 7 and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. 8 And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. (Which is kind of awesome, if you ask me.)

Vs 10 I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them... 11 So I confronted the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their stations.

14 Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service. Good!

15 In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath... 17 Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers act in this way, and (for that reason) did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city?" (Verse) 22 Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves... to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love. **Good!**

Vs. 23 In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah... 25 And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. (Which, again, is kind of awesome.)

25 And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. **26** Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him... Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.”

Verse **28** And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite (Sanballat, you remember, was the other chief antagonist of Nehemiah). Therefore I chased him out of my presence.

29 Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

30 Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work... **And read this last verse—the last verse not just of Nehemiah, but the last verse of the whole Old Testament, with me aloud:** **31** Remember me, O my God, for good.

Remember *THEM*, God, for all the bad they did and curse them for it; and remember *ME* for good.

And that’s it. The curtain falls, and thus ends the Old Testament.

Leader: “This is the Word of God for the people of God.”

Church: “Thanks be to God.”

You may be seated.

OK, here’s the context: Nehemiah had been called back to Persia for a bureaucratic meeting with the king, and while he was gone, Israel went off the rails. They disobeyed God in the three areas they had covenanted to obey him in Nehemiah 10.

Nehemiah 10, you see, was the last chapter dealing with Israel's big spiritual revival called the Water Gate revival. We've spent a couple of weeks on it already; in Nehemiah 8, they'd stood literally all day to hear God's Word read and wept as they heard it; then, in chapter 9, confessed their sins, and in chapter 10 they made a covenant with God that they would honor him and keep his statutes forever, and they highlighted three specific areas:

1. (10:30) "We will not give our daughters to people around us or take their daughters for our sons." (10:30) (By the way, this was not a racial purity thing; it was an avoiding-spiritual-compromise thing.) God had always told Israel that intermarrying with unbelievers was the quickest way to destroy the faith for the next generation. Kids get raised in a home where mommy worships one God and daddy worships another. On one side of the home, mom lives with a certain set of priorities, and dad lives with a whole different set of priorities on the other side. And that all but kills faith in the next generation. It was famously the downfall of Solomon—the wisest, most blessed king in Israel's history. He was brought down through marriage to unbelieving wives.
2. (10:31), The people said, "We will not buy or sell on the Sabbath." (10:31) "We'll honor God with one day devoted to rest and worship, just like he commanded."

And then, vs 32, promise 3. "We will not neglect the house of God" (10:32, my paraphrase). They promised to support the work of God generously, to tithe out of the firstfruits of their produce to support it.

Those, of course, are the very three things Nehemiah 13 says they go back on. Y'all, it's so easy to promise these things in a moment of inspiration, only to falter in a moment of exhaustion.

The Anglican theologian **J.I. Packer** always has the greatest description of the Christian life. He says, "Our spiritual life (he said) is ... a fragile convalescence, easily disrupted."

- Convalescence is that time in the hospital after being treated for some sickness. That time where doctors and nurses are paying close attention to you, monitoring all your vital signs, making sure you get just the right amount of food, rest, and medicine. And it's especially important to be really consistent with your treatment, or you'll fall back into your sickness.
- That's what the Christian life is like, Packer says—a fragile convalescence, easily interrupted. **I shouldn't tell you this**, but my wife got one of those red light masks for Christmas that's supposed to help your face not get wrinkled or whatever. And the deal is you have to wear it basically every day for like five weeks straight, and then after that, you drop down to once or twice per week. So I decided I'd do it with her; I don't want her face looking like warm sunshine while mine looks like a raisin. **But who can remember to put that thing on every day?** So I'd do it for like a week straight, and then I'd forget for three or four days, and then the manual said I had to start the five-week clock over. If you want it to work, you've got to be consistent.
- (PIC). So this is me at night now. I've even thought about putting it in the car so I can drive with it on, but it freaks people out.
- "Our spiritual life is ... a fragile convalescence, easily disrupted."

Or, write this down: **It's not inspiration that counts in the Christian life; it's perspiration. It's not excitement; it's endurance.**

So, where have you fallen away from some promise you made in good faith?

- Maybe at the first of the year you made a decision to read your Bible every day—and you did that for about two weeks, and then you stopped.
- **Or you made a decision to start attending church**—you were going to give it a year, just like I challenged you, but now you've stopped. (And some of you sitting here in front of me are like, "Well, J.D., we're obviously still doing that. How are the people who have stopped coming gonna hear you say this?" They're watching online right now! I see you ... Listen, I'm glad you're joining us that way, but just know sitting on your couch at home doesn't fully count as church—the online experience is for extraordinary circumstances, not replacement church.)
- **Maybe you decided you would stop some sinful habit, like looking at pornography or drinking too much alcohol**, and you even got an accountability partner, and you started out so well—but it's been several weeks since you checked in with them, and just this week you've gotten back into it. Or maybe you were going to meet with some guys for Bible study and accountability, but you've petered out.
- **Or maybe you've faltered in one of the three specific areas mentioned here that Israel faltered.** I mean, these are three perennial problems:
 - **You made a decision to break off a bad relationship**—a relationship that was bringing you down—a dating relationship, a friendship, but now you've gone back to it. Or maybe you've started to date an unbeliever. Like Nehemiah warns here, that is literally the quickest way to destroy your own faith, not to mention the faith of every future generation of your family. Scripture is clear, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers," which means don't date or marry an unbeliever (2 Corinthians 6); and if you marry, Paul says, marry only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7), which means to date "only in the Lord."
 - **Or maybe it's in how you treat the Sabbath:** And let me encourage you to think of the Sabbath as more than just a ritual day you take off, but as emblematic of the priority you give your relationship to God. Are you giving your relationship with God the priority you told him you would, which includes taking one day a week where you stop working or studying or whatever, and rest and focus on your relationship with him? Have you faltered there?
 - **Or maybe you committed to tithe**—to give God first place in your budget, giving him the first 10 percent; and you tried it for a month, but then it got hard, and so you stopped.

Again: **It's not inspiration that counts in the Christian life; it's perspiration. It's not excitement; it's endurance.**

By the way, a significant thing to note is that this **scene here in Nehemiah 13, that marks the end of Israel's Old Testament history**, is nearly identical to the one in Exodus that opens it. Exodus 19, God appeared to the people on Mount Sinai, and they experienced revival just like the people did in Nehemiah 8 and 9. And then, Exodus 24, the Israelites promised to obey God and his commands forever, just like they did in Nehemiah 10. And then Moses, Exodus 32, left for a while, just like Nehemiah did in chapter 13—Moses went back up onto Mount Sinai to receive some more instruction from God, but like Nehemiah, he ended up being gone a little longer than the people expected, and so the people were like, "Well, obviously Moses has forgotten us ... and God too, or maybe God's not even real; either way, we need something we can depend on," so they fashioned a golden calf to stand in for God, started to worship it, and ended up engaging in a drunken orgy.

What that means—and get this—**Old Testament history ends the same way it started**—the people obey in a moment of high inspiration in the presence of a compelling leader, but they fall away whenever that inspiration has died down and the leader is gone.

And that's depressing, because that's not the kind of obedience God wants, right? God wants a people who obey whether there's someone there to enforce it or not.

I mean, I don't want my children doing right simply because I'm physically present to coerce it, right? No parents want that. I want my children to do right because it's become part of their nature; I want them to tell the truth because they love integrity; I want them to be kind and selfless because that's just in their nature, not because I'm present to enforce it or because I reward them with an ice cream cone.

That's what God wants from his children too. I've compared it before—and this is a gross analogy, but it makes the point—I've compared it to how you'd respond to a pile of vomit that you encounter. If someone got sick between services and threw up right down here on the floor ... a nice, steaming pile of vomit in the middle of the floor—it looks gross; it smells bad—all of you instinctively would avoid it. I would not have to stand up here and say, "Now, everyone, we're getting ready to dismiss, but I need to warn you, it is strictly against our policies here at the Summit to play in someone else's vomit. I mean it; if I catch any of you up here playing in this vomit, we're going to have to escort you out." I wouldn't have to say that. I wouldn't have to station a security guard up here to enforce your obedience. No, you avoid vomit because it's gross to you. (Now, that's not true, of course, if you're a dog. A dog is like, "Warm vomit? Yumm? Half-digested breakfast sausage? Amazing.")

God doesn't want a generation of spiritual dogs who avoid the vomit of sin only because there's a strong leader standing in front of it with a big stick; he wants a generation of spiritual sons and daughters who love what he loves and hate what he hates, **by nature**—because they are his offspring. The question is HOW he is going to produce a generation of people with those kinds of hearts?

That's the question the Old Testament ends with.

So here's what I'm going to do with the remainder of our time. First, I'm going to show you really practically where all this compromise started, because it is a very practical lesson to us. Lots of good takeaways. But then I'm going to show you how this anti-climactic, depressing end to Nehemiah answers the question the Old Testament leaves you hanging with. How the anti-finale sets us up for the greatest finale of all time.

First, the practical lesson:

I. The First Step in Falling Away Is Letting Tobiah Into Your Temple (13:4–5)

How does Israel get to the place that they renege on every commitment they made in Nehemiah 10? Well, I think the way the chapter is written is significant. The first thing Nehemiah records is Eliashib's choice to give Tobiah a room in the temple, and I think that's significant. The temple was

the most sacred place in Israel, and **vs 4** says Eliashib provided Tobiah a place to stay there—and not just a little closet either; **vs 5** tells us he gave him a large place, a place of influence.

Tobiah, as I reminded you, was one of Nehemiah’s chief antagonists from the beginning: Back in chapter 4, he’d tried to sabotage Nehemiah’s wall-building efforts, and in chapter 6 he’d even participated in a plot to assassinate Nehemiah. On top of all that, Tobiah was an Ammonite, and God had said in Deuteronomy 23 that no Ammonite was to enter the assembly of the Lord because of how badly the Ammonites had treated God’s people during the Exodus. God had said this ban on the Ammonites extended “down to the 10th generation,” which was a Hebrew way of saying “forever.”

Eliashib knew all this—it was part of the Law he’d helped read out loud in Nehemiah 8—but did you notice that little detail in vs 4 that said Tobiah was a “relative” of Eliashib? They were family by marriage, and you know what, family relationships are complicated, aren’t they? And sometimes it’s easier just to get along and go along than it is to rock the boat by standing up for what is right. To just keep your mouth shut, for example, when you’re the only one in the family who believes a certain thing, and you know that family is going to give you a hard time if you speak up. Or to be the one parent in the group who says, “I don’t think that’s a good idea for our children.” Or “We don’t talk that way,” or “Our family is not OK with these things.”

Or to be the one guy in the group of friends who objects to some activity or some line of joking, or the one person in your class willing to stand up for a biblical conviction that has become wildly unpopular in our culture.³

Eliashib, under family pressure, the high priest, allowed a compromised man to occupy a place in the temple. And from there, everything began to unravel. Look down at verse **28: And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest** (so, one of his grandsons), **was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite.**

One of Eliashib’s grandsons married Sanballat’s daughter. Sanballat, of course, was the *other* archenemy of Nehemiah. He was to Tobiah what Voldemort was to Bellatrix.

Parents, sin never stays in your house; it multiplies into the next generation. Eliashib’s grandson was like, “Well, granddaddy Eliashib seemed ok with Tobiah, and Sanballat’s daughter here is super cute; sure, she worships differently than we do and has different priorities, but she can’t be that bad.”

Parents, hear me: Compromise is a seed that multiplies, like a weed, into the hearts and lives of our children. You know, it’s devastating as a parent to see one of your sins manifest in one of your kid’s lives— isn’t it? And what’s especially weighty is that it usually multiplies in them.

³ 2:10, 19; 4:3

- You're a little materialistic (as in, you talk about money and it's obvious you like nice things, and your discontentment with what you have or your jealousy toward others who have a little more than you seeps out from time to time; your kids rarely hear you talk about generosity or your commitment to tithe)—that multiplies in your kids, who grow up entitled and entirely focused on money.
- Or you're super conscious about how you look; your kids grow up obsessed with self-image. Or you enjoy slinging a little gossip around your house or on the phone to your friends; your kids hear that, and they grow up with backbiting and exclusivist tendencies.
- Or you don't abandon church, but you don't exactly prioritize it either. You'll skip it pretty easily. Ballgames and travel and beach houses always take precedence over consistency in church, and that multiplies in your kids to where church is not a priority at all. As young adults, they rarely go to church because there is always something else on the weekend to do, and you've raised them to assume that if there's something more interesting to do on the weekend, time with God's people takes a back seat.
- (I'm not saying there's never a time it's OK to miss church; I'm just saying what you sow in seed form multiplies into your kids.)
- And listen, I'm not trying to say any problems your kids have are your fault or your responsibility; no, our kids make their own decisions, and you can raise them wonderfully and they might still make bad decisions. I'm just saying that compromise has a way of multiplying itself into the next generation. **What is neglected in one generation is abandoned by the next.**

That's true in a family; it's also true in a whole community. When the high priest brought compromise into the temple, it affected more than just his family; the whole community of Israel started faltering in their obedience. LISTEN: When compromise is given a place "in the temple," other sins quickly follow. For example, when a church starts to question the inerrancy or authority of God's Word, it's not long before its members start questioning some of the Bible's supposedly "outdated" teachings—things like Paul's insistence that only qualified men serve in the office of pastor, or the truth of what the Bible teaches about sex and gender and marriage.

I remember when I was in college, my religiously affiliated college, some of my professors—religious professors who would readily say they were Christians—felt perfectly free declaring certain New Testament teachings to be outdated. And they had a clever way of doing it. They'd say, "Well, Jesus is our standard for interpreting the Bible," which meant they would apply their understanding of Jesus to anything the Bible said that they didn't like and declare it to be deficient. For example, if what Paul said in one of his epistles was inconsistent with how they understood "Jesus," "Well," they'd say, "Paul was just wrong here, because the real Jesus isn't like that." I always wanted to ask them where they got their understanding of the "*real*" Jesus from. I mean, don't we get that ... *from the New Testament*? Can you explain to me the logical consistency of saying you learn about Jesus from the New Testament, but then use your understanding of Jesus to rule out things the New Testament says? It sure sounds like you have a version of Jesus that you want to be true, which is basically a glorified version of your own preferences, and then you use that image of Jesus as the standard for ruling out anything God's Word says that you don't want to be true. You just don't want God to be God; you would prefer to be God. We don't judge God's Word; God's Word judges us. And when you allow that kind of compromise into the temple—when you start to question God's Word—that always ends with other, more severe compromises. Every affirming church in the Triangle who now ordains homosexual clergy started by questioning whether the New Testament was really authoritative for their beliefs or practices, and thought making a few exceptions was OK. Once you let Tobiah have a place in the temple, it corrupts the people from the inside out.

Compromise did what the enemies of Israel could not. Nehemiah successfully resisted every external attack. What brought Jerusalem down was compromise. Hear me: Persecution will never kill the church; compromise will.

It's like I've told you, Jesus is not a salad bar where you take the items you want and leave the ones you don't. When my girls were little, we'd do the little Build-a-Bear thing where you'd go to the store and pick out the materials to design the bear you wanted to cuddle with at night. Build-a-Bear. No one else got to design your bear; that was your bear. That may work for a kid's stuffed animal, but there is no "Build-a-God" store. You either receive God as he reveals himself, or you reject him.

Parents—I don't know why I feel especially burdened to talk with you today—maybe the Holy Spirit has really put some things on my heart for you, I don't know—but beware compromise. Beware bad relationships. Listen, it's true: Bad company corrupts good morals. Your kids, we always say, will become the average of their five closest friends. Their friends are the future "them." I always say, "You show me their friends, I'll show you their future." That's exactly what Proverbs 13:20 says, *"He who walks with wise men shall be wise; the companion of fools will suffer ruin."* I read recently that the most reliable predictor of whether a child goes on in church involvement post-high school is if five adults in their church know them by name and have some kind of relationship with them. Five adults in the church who know them through the church—if your kid has that when they graduate from high school, the chances are really high they will continue on with church in college and then as a young adult. And the only way they can have those relationships is for you to be involved in church. Not come-every-other-week-and-sit-through-a-service involved, but involved in small group, volunteering, student ministry—student ministry is one of the things I love most about this church; it's one of the best kept secrets of The Summit Church.

So I say all this especially to the parents, but it's a word for all of us. Beware bad relationships. Compromise always starts (usually because of family or peer pressure), when you let some form of compromise or unbelief occupy a room in the temple of your heart, and when you do that, it won't be long until that compromise has worked its way out until it has leavened the whole loaf. Keep Tobiah out of the temple of your heart.

But that brings us to our last observation, not just of this message, but of the whole book of Nehemiah and also the whole Old Testament:

II. Jesus Answers the Question Left Hanging in the Old Testament (13:34–35)

As I've shown you, the book of Nehemiah ends on such a downer.

- Nehemiah goes on a little trip and the people bring Tobiah to live in the temple, and then the people renege on every commitment they made during the revival.
- **Tim Mackie of The Bible Project** says that chapter 13 negates all the accomplishments of chapters 1–12.

"But at least," you say, *"Nehemiah stays faithful, right?"* **Well, sort of. He's certainly zealous for obedience, and that's good.** I mean, he throws out all of Tobiah's furniture in a tantrum (vs 9); he cusses out a bunch of Hebrews who break God's law and intermarry with unbelievers, and he pulls their hair out with his hands (that's vs 25); and then he chases the grandson of Eliashib, who married Sanballat's daughter, out of town with a stick

(vs 28). This guy is like **Rip on Yellowstone**. Or so I'm told. (Or for you Gen Z'ers, he's the Jack Bauer of the Old Testament; the Chuck Norris; for you Gen Z'ers, John Wick; Jack Reacher). None of these characters, however, fully captures the spirit of Nehemiah, which is why I say he could only be played by ... say it with me ... **PIC:** Nicolas Cage.

That's certainly zealous for righteousness, which is good, but there's just something ... off ... with Nehemiah's behavior, right? I mean, **where's the Nehemiah of chapter 1 who is broken, weeping over sin, who identifies himself with the people of Israel and confesses their sins as his own?** The Nehemiah who literally risks his life for his people and paid for their salaries out of his own account? Who presents his problems to God and waits for him to act? That guy seems to be gone, and in his place is the red-faced, cussing, stick-waving, hair-pulling-out screamer who tries to coerce obedience through the force of his personality, who ends the book praying only for his own blessing and not really caring about anybody else. Literally, in the last verses of the book, Nehemiah prays a curse against the people, **vs 29** "Remember them, o my God ... for how they've done all this bad stuff and punish them," and then Nehemiah closes out the Old Testament with the words: **31 Remember me (only me), O my God, for good.**

Don't miss the significance of that: The last leader of the Old Testament closes out Old Testament history by praying for the people's cursing and his own blessing.

Plus, the Jerusalem he's restored is only a pittance of what it once was; technically, the temple and walls are rebuilt, but it's only a shadow of what Solomon's former temple and city walls were in all their glory. (In fact, it says when they got done with them that the elders of Israel wept because they remembered what it looked like before it got destroyed.) It **would be like if America was attacked and the White House** was destroyed—and after the war was over, you set up a couple of doublewide trailers on 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and said, "There! White House restored!" True, you've put up a white house, but it's only a shadow of what it once was in its glory days. Jerusalem and the temple are nothing like what it once was, and certainly not all that God had promised it would one day be.

And this is how the Old Testament ends. A bitter, cranky, defeated old man standing in a very unimpressive Jerusalem, saying, "To heck with all of you! God, at least save me!" And then it fades to black. And you're like, that's it? *Stranger Things*. *The Sopranos*. *Seinfeld*. Or the end of the first *Lord of the Rings* movie. Remember that? Basically, everybody's dead and these two short little hairy goobers are headed off into the dark forests of Mordor. And you're like, "That's it? That's the end of the movie?"

The message is clear though, isn't it? We need a Reformer greater than Nehemiah.

- One who can change his people from the inside out.
- A Reformer who does more than just instructs us in the Law, but also gives us the Spirit to obey it.
- We need a Reformer who will not lose his temper and cast us away when we disappoint him.
- We need a Reformer who will restore Zion, the city of God, not only to its former glory, but a city radiating with the unveiled glory of God himself. A city on a hill whose light would break over the nations like the dawn, as Isaiah promised; a city where sadness flees, and songs of

redemption echo in her streets; a city that would be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, just like he promised; a city that no longer goes by the name “Forsaken,” but “My Delight.”

Yeah, Nehemiah 13:31 may feel like an anticlimactic ending to the Old Testament, but can you think up a better way to set up the New Testament? 425 years later, another Reformer came to Jerusalem:

- He too would be a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, and he too who would weep over the broken-down state of Jerusalem
- He too would face incredible opposition, both from within and without; from enemies who hated him, friends who betrayed him, and disciples who disappointed him
- He too would be accused of attempting to be an unlawful king
- And he too would ride into the temple and throw out the enemies who had taken up residence there

But this Reformer, at the end of his life, when his people had disappointed and forsaken him again and again, did not cuss them out or pull out THEIR hair and say, “Remember me, and only me, my God, for good;” instead, he allowed himself to be cursed by them and to have his hair pulled out by them, and when it was all over, he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do ...” not “Remember me, oh my God, for all the good I have done” but “Remember THEM because of all I have done.”

Listen, y’all—we were so bad that nothing short of the Son of God could save us, and yet we are so perfectly loved that Jesus did it gladly.⁴

Maybe most importantly, this Reformer, after he had died for the sins of his people, resurrected from the dead so he could put his Spirit into his people and abide with them forever.

And you see, that addresses the biggest problem the book of Nehemiah leaves us with: ***the problem of a constantly backsliding people***—who only obey when there’s a leader present there to threaten them.

We needed a Reformer who could transform us from the inside out, and what that means is we needed not a Reformer but a SAVIOR.

Listen, some of you really need to learn this: You can’t live the Christian life. You CAN’T! I don’t care how hard you try or how sincere your promises are! The depravity of your sinful flesh is too much. You can’t overcome it; only he can overcome it through you.

I’ve told you before: The Christian life is not just hard, it’s impossible. It was so impossible that only one human being in history has ever been able to live it, and he was so good at it that they named it for him. And the good news of the gospel is that he offers to come and live it in and through you.

⁴ Tim Keller

“I am crucified with Christ,” Paul says. **“Nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me.”** The Spirit of Jesus is the answer to backsliding.

Imagine you were about to go into some spiritual battle, some temptation, but just before you went, Jesus, a physical Jesus, grabbed you and said, “First, I’m praying for you. I’m personally asking my Father to give you victory. Second,” he says, “I’m going to put my very Spirit in you”—and then he breathes on you and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Then he says, “I want you to access the power of that Spirit when you need strength. Don’t try to live this life for me out of your own strength; lean into this Spirit I just put into you.” Imagine how you’d feel facing that temptation now, facing that opposition. Of course, that’s exactly what he’s done. So when you feel yourself backsliding, pray to him: **“Jesus, my heart—prone to wander, Lord, I feel it! Renew in me a heart to pursue and please you. I can’t do this, Jesus, but you can do it through me.”**

Nehemiah is not primarily a book about leadership or how to lead a reformation, it’s a book about Jesus—a book to make you stand in awe of him and put your hope in him.

Heads bowed...

So here’s the thing: I think there are a bunch of people here struggling with compromises; your flesh feels weak. I want to invite you to come today to the altar of God and confess that, to give up trying to do it in your own strength and ask for his. And to renew your resolve to follow him.

Where is that for you? With your habits, your relationships, in wrestling with an addiction? Maybe you need this power in your marriage, or to follow through on something you know God wants you to do. Whatever it is, the altar of God is open for you to come and get strength.

As always, elders and prayer team members are off to the side at every campus. Maybe you need physical healing or freedom from an addiction or a stronghold or something you know you need spiritual power from. Take advantage of them, if you want, and go to them and they can pray over you. Others can use this space down here, or you can always do that in your seat.

Let’s stand to sing, and you respond as the Spirit of God urges you.

PRAY/TRANSITION

Post response: Philippians begins!