

Preventing Burnout and Preserving Power

by Ray C. Stedman

As we come to the closing study in this great book of Nehemiah it has been a refreshing thing for me to see how God greatly used this remarkable man, cupbearer to the King of Persia, to restore the worship of Jehovah to the nation of Judah.

The title of this message, *Preventing Burnout and Preserving Power*, tells the whole story of Nehemiah's final acts. It is the account of his reform after his second return from Babylon to Jerusalem. It is the story, as we will see, of the reinstatement of Sabbath observances and his refusal to permit the intermarriage of Jews with pagan peoples. You might well be asking, "What does that all have to do with burnout and power?" I am glad you asked that! I will attempt to answer it as this passage unfolds.

Let us begin in Chapter 13 with Verse 15, **the restoring of the Sabbath regulations**. Nehemiah says:

In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. I rebuked the nobles

of Judah and said to them, "What is this wicked thing you are doing-desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath." {Neh 13:15-18 NIV}

Even today in Israel you cannot get a hot meal in a Jewish hotel from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. The elevators will not be operating. You must use the stairs to get to your room. The shops are closed. Buses quit running, all because it is the Sabbath. This causes a great deal of inconvenience to tourists. Even many Jews do not like it. But the orthodox Jewish groups are powerful enough that they can require the whole country to observe the Sabbath Day whether they like it or not.

Even in Nehemiah's day we can see that this was a burdensome requirement to the people. No work was to be done and no business to be carried out, making trade very inconvenient. On his return from Babylon, Nehemiah found that in the twelve years he was away people had begun again to ignore the Sabbath day requirements. The streets were full of traffic. The stores were wide open.

His reaction is one of shock, not so much at what was happening, because this had happened before, but at the ease with which the people seemed to forget the lessons of the past. He re-

minds them that this violation is a serious thing. “What are you doing?” he cries. “Don’t you know that God takes the Sabbath seriously? All the hurt, calamity and disaster which we have been going through has been caused, according to the Scripture, by the failure of our forefathers to observe the Sabbath regulations.”

Then, using his full authority as the governor, Nehemiah immediately orders some changes.

When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. But I warned them and said, “Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. {Neh 13:19-22a NIV}

It is clear that Nehemiah was deeply concerned by this disregard of the Law. He saw it not merely as an ignoring of certain traditional ritual, but as something that God took very seriously. He is intent on trying to correct the difficulties that had caused so much of the problem of Israel in the past. So he orders the gates to be closed at sunset on Friday. Those who camped outside the walls, waiting for the regulations to be ended to come in and begin their selling, he orders driven away from the city. He does not want them even hanging around outside. He requires the Levites to cleanse themselves and to guard the gates so that no one violates the Sabbath.

Then in a closing prayer in Verse 22 Nehemiah humbly prays that God will guide him and bless him in this zealous concern and expression.

Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love. {Neh 13:22b NIV}

What does this all mean for us?

Should we also keep the Sabbath by refraining from work and travel? A lot of people today still think so:

- Seventh Day Adventists, most of whom are godly, warm-hearted Christian believers, think that it is wrong to celebrate Sunday as the Lord’s day. They claim that Saturday is the Sabbath day and that we ought to be holding church services on that day, refraining from work, and following the limitations that the Law required.
- In the highly honored film *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell, the young Scottish athlete, refused to run a race on the Sabbath day because he had been brought up in the Presbyterian church to regard Sunday as the Sabbath. I think he was mistaken in that, but his actions are a wonderful picture of the teaching of the New Testament that “whatsoever is not of faith is sin,” {Rom 14:23 KJV}. He would have violated his conscience had he not observed what he had been taught was right.

But as we have already seen throughout this book, these regulations imposed upon Israel, and these limitations, especially regarding the Sabbath, were what the New Testament calls “shadows,” pictures of something even more important that God wants observed. God teaches that truth by means of these regulations, these pictures and shadows, but what he really wants is the truth they are portraying. And that truth, of course, is what the New Testament wants Christians to observe. You observe the Sabbath when you fulfill what the Sabbath portrays.

What is that?

At the heart of the Sabbath is the word “rest.” The Sabbath is intended for man, that he may learn to rest. Here is where the problem of burnout enters. We are a restless people today. One of the major problems in Silicon Valley is stress and burnout. People cannot handle life any more because of the tremendous pressures they are under.

I heard recently of a man who ran up to an airline office and said, “Give me a ticket.” They said, “Where to?” He replied, “Anywhere. I’ve got business everywhere!” That is the kind of pressure that some have to live under these days.

The Sabbath, to put it in modern terms, is *God’s stress management program!* It is how to prevent burnout – how to recover from too much pressure and catch up with yourself. It is how to gather yourself together, and become able to handle

the work you must do, without falling apart or being emotionally damaged.

The first thing God emphasized in giving the Sabbath, of course, was that human bodies need rest. You cannot keep working day after day without exacting a tremendous toll on your body. Our bodies, even as believers, are not redeemed. They grow weary.

I spent this past week at Dallas Theological Seminary and spoke sixteen times in four days. One day I spoke six times, ending up with a large home Bible study in Fort Worth. I have to tell you I am feeling a bit of stress today. My body is weary. I am looking forward to tomorrow (which is the Sabbath for me), when I can enjoy a little rest and recovery.

According to the Word of God the body must have one day in seven to rest. The mind and the emotions require it, too. We are under so much tension today from so many demands upon us that our emotions sometimes get out of joint. We find ourselves growing irascible, testy, and short-tempered. We are unable to keep control at times. These are symptoms of approaching burnout. The spirit within, the very center of our being, requires time to meditate, to contemplate and relate to life. We need time to see the big picture and pull back for a bit from things around. God has provided for this in the Sabbath.

There are two reasons given in the Scripture for the inauguration of the Sabbath.

1. Most of us know the first one, which is found in Exodus 20, Verse 11. There we are told that because God finished creation in six days, and at the end of the six days rested on the seventh day he, therefore, asked his people to rest after six days of labor.

You have to ask yourself, why did God rest? God is not a man. He does not get weary. The answer is, he rested because he was through! He did what he intended to do. He accomplished his objective. What he is teaching by that is that man, too, must recognize a limit to his work. There is a time to say you are through. There is a need to let go, to stop, to allow the body, mind, and spirit to recognize its limitations, and be content with them.

2. The second reason the Sabbath was given is often ignored. It is found in Deuteronomy

Chapter 5, Verse 15. God said to Israel, "Remember you were slaves in Egypt. The Lord brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God commands you to observe the Sabbath day," {cf, Deut 5:15 NIV}.

That is a different reason from that of creation. They were to rest in order to reflect on God's ability to work beyond the labors they had already completed. Israel did not deliver itself from Egypt. It could not. When they came to the Red Sea they panicked. They did not know how they were going to get through the waters. The Egyptian army was coming on like forty acres of horseradish behind them, and the Israelites were afraid. But God opened the waters before them. They were delivered with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, they were to think of that when they observed the Sabbath day, the day of rest.

So there are two aspects of the Sabbath – creation and redemption. There are two forms of rest. There is a *rest of cessation*; a ceasing from our own works. As the much-loved old hymn has it,

Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save and Thou alone.

I cannot contribute to my own redemption. My good works do not save me, nor can they. That is the "rest" of the new creation. It is to cease from your own works and trust God in the work that he has done for you.

But then there is the *rest of rejoicing* in the mighty delivering power of God. That deliverance is a process. It goes on beyond the *rest* of salvation to the *rest* of accomplishment. It is learning how to keep calm and poised, to not become overwrought by anxiety or pressure but to keep steady because you are looking to God to work in what you are doing. That is a *rest of faith* in the mighty hand of God.

Jesus spoke of both of these in one wonderful sentence found in Matthew 11. "Come to me," he says, "all you who are weary and burdened, and I

will give you rest,” {Matt 11:28 NIV}. Just *come*, he says, that is all. “Come to me. Trust me. Rest upon what I have already done, and I will give you a rest.” This is the rest of regeneration. We enter become a new creation. Then he said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,” {Matt 11:29a NIV} [that is a process] “... and you will find rest for your souls,” {Matt 11:29c NIV}. So there is a rest that is given and a rest that is found, as we walk on with the Lord.

Both of these are what God is concerned with in the Sabbath. This is what it seeks to picture. If we are doing these we are fulfilling the Sabbath as God intended the it to be fulfilled. Stop your own work. Stop trying to save yourself. Trust his work for you. And then obey him. Follow him, learn of him, accompany him throughout your life. You will discover God working through you, doing mighty, delivering things which you could not do. That is the rest of accomplishment. Watch God at work!

We hear much about these *rests* these days. We sing about them in our hymns. We talk about them in churches. But it seems to me that the second aspect of rest is very little observed. I find many people looking for emotional help from a psychiatrist or a counselor. They are seeking human beings who will support and understand them. But they are ignoring what the New Testament offers. We have a High Priest, the book of Hebrews says, in order that we may “come boldly unto the throne of grace, ... to find grace to help in time of need,” {Heb 4:16 KJV}. Very few people seem to rely upon that provision of strength and grace from on high to carry them through the pressures and the burdens of life.

Do you see now why I call the Sabbath *God’s Stress Management Program*? Burnout is over-stress. We need to stop and rest, and learn what God can do beyond what we have done.

I have learned in my own life to detect certain signs of stress. When I begin to get under the pile and feel anxious and pressured, I develop an itch in various places on my body. I have learned to recognize that immediately as a sign of stress. It cannot be cured with medicine, so I have trained myself to stop and take what I call “a mini-Sabbath.” Let me suggest something to you. If you feel pressured at any time, try to get a half hour alone. That is about all you need:

- Start with taking ten deep breaths to relax your physical body.
- Ask God to speak to you during this special time.
- Begin to review your life for the past few weeks:
 - How much you have been driven? – the pressure of problems, etc.
 - Then ask God to help you put order and priority into your life.
- Take time to evaluate where you are spiritually.
- Make some new commitments.
 - Write down those items that you feel are really important.
- Ask yourself, “If I only had a month to live, how would I spend my time?”
- Put your focus on God at work in your life.

That is observing the Sabbath. That is God’s stress management program.

The final problem that Nehemiah faces was the tendency so common in Israel to ignore **the prohibitions against intermarriage with pagan peoples**. When he returned to Jerusalem, he found the people again disobeying the Law.

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. {Neh 13:23-24 NIV}

It was true then as it is today that when the fathers disobey, it is the children who suffer. These children were forgetting how to communicate in the language of Judah. Pagan tribes in the Old Testament portray the world and its ways of operation. The parallel in the church is very plain. When Christians begin to adopt the world’s values and the world’s ways, we invariably turn our children away from the things that make for stability and strength.

In Texas last week, a pastor who has been closely associated with us here told me about what

had happened to him recently. The church where he was the pastor had elders who insisted on running the church like a business. They ignored what the New Testament says about the way elders are to function among the flock of God. They decided that they, as successful businessmen, knew more about that than the New Testament did. They introduced secular programming and ways of making decisions. They elected a chairman who would have the ultimate say. The buck would stop with him. They asked the pastor not to teach expositively from the Scripture because it would take too long and there was much of the Bible they were not interested in hearing. He objected to that, and so, finally, he was replaced by a man who would do what they said. The result in the church, this pastor told me with tears running down his face, was that the young people were forsaking the church and turning to drugs and sexual promiscuity, no longer understanding the spiritual language of the people of God.

That is why Nehemiah is understandably upset by this. He takes drastic action.

I rebuked them and called curses down on them. [Literally, “I pronounced them cursed.”] **I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair.** [I have been studying this as the way to handle a congregation that does not behave itself!] **I made them take an oath in God’s name and said: “You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons of yourselves. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?”**

One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me. {Neh 13:25-28 NIV}

This is, as I suggested last week, an Old Testament equivalent of Jesus cleansing the temple. I want to make clear that neither our Lord’s action

in the temple nor these actions by Nehemiah are a literal model of how Christians are to behave.

Last week after the message, a very pleasant and respectful young lady approached me and suggested that this church was not doing its share in resisting the terrible plague of abortion because we did not join with the group called “Operation Rescue.” This is a group which publicly demonstrates in front of abortion clinics. They are willing to use their own bodies to oppose abortion. She suggested that Nehemiah is a good example of how to act when you are upset by something that is wrong. I tried to point out to her, as I hope I can make clear to you, that we must never forget that these actions in the Old Testament are shadows. They are not something we are to repeat literally ourselves.

According to the New Testament, we are to move beyond the external teaching mechanism of the shadows to the meaning of what these shadows portray. It is the fulfillment of the shadow that is our model to follow. There is much difficulty in the world today because people have tried to carry these Old Testament restrictions over into today.

The struggle that is going on in South Africa over apartheid is a case in point. The Dutch people tried to take literally the requirements of the Old Testament to separate the races and to not allow their children to intermarry. That is the philosophy back of apartheid. The painful result is very visible in South African society today.

How are we to behave then? Here, Nehemiah portrays a commendable zeal in acting. He drives these people away because he was so offended by the fact that the grandson of the high priest had married the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite, the worshipper of the god Horon, who had opposed him when he first came to Israel to rebuild the wall.

What are we to do today in fulfillment of this shadow?

This is a picture of the foolishness of trying to mix the world’s ways and God’s ways. That is what is portrayed by intermarrying with foreign women. When a church tries to run itself, not according to the teaching of the New Testament but by business processes and by the philosophies of the world around, seeking honor and prestige and perhaps installing a hierarchy in its leadership, etc., it is doing exactly what this warns us against. God’s work is to be done in God’s way, and to bor-

row from the world is to introduce confusion into the camp.

There is an explanation of Nehemiah's concern and of his prayer in these closing verses.

Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.

So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times and for the firstfruits. {Neh 13:29-31a NIV}

And he closes his book with these words:

Remember me with favor, O my God. {Neh 13:31b NIV}

The key here, of course, is these words, "because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood." The priestly office was to be a picture of the ministry of Jesus. He is the great High Priest who has come to meet man in his lostness and weakness and to restore him. The church is called to the same work and the same ministry, as the Body of Christ.

Jesus himself defined the work of the church for us in that wonderful scene in the synagogue of Nazareth, recorded in Luke 4, where he quoted from Isaiah these words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to give liberty to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed, and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord," {cf, Luke 4:18-19 KJV}. That is the work of the church:

- to preach to people the good news of the gospel,

- to minister to people's hurts,
- to lift the burden of guilt in their lives,
- to teach them
 - how to be free from sinful habits,
 - how to oppose the powers of darkness and the occult world,
 - to understand that God is in control of life, and
- to give hope to the hopeless.

That is the work of the church, and that is always what suffers when the church begins to operate in the ways of the world.

I want to close by reading a brief quotation from John R. W. Stott who puts this very well. He says of the church,

Our motive must be concern for the glory of God, not the glory of the Church or our own personal glory.

Our message must be the good news of God, as given by Christ and His apostles, not the traditions of men or our own opinions.

Our manpower must be the whole Church of God, and every member of it, not a privileged few who want to retain certain ministry as their own prerogative.

Our dynamic must be the Spirit of God, not the power of human personality, or organization or eloquence. Without these priorities we shall be silent when we ought to be vocal.

So Nehemiah ends his book on a very practical note.

This is the way Christians change the world. This is the way we affect the times in which we live. We are not here to be a tightly knit, quiet community, operating for our own benefit. We are here to change the world!