

THE NEED FOR VIGILANCE

SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH

Steve Zeisler

I have a friend who makes a thoughtful analogy. He says that moral failure and spiritual decline are a great deal like a flat tire. Most flat tires don't occur as the result of a blowout. They occur because air leaks out over time, often imperceptibly. We're not aware that they exist until perhaps the car is difficult to steer.

The decline of one's spiritual life, the loss of one's vitality for the things of God, may very well be the same. It may happen over a period of time, perhaps somewhat imperceptibly. We may not be aware of what's happening.

David, for example, did not wake up one morning in shameful compromise. He began by giving responsibilities that should have been his to other people, by indulging himself in little things, and he ended up as an adulterer and murderer. Judas didn't determine overnight to betray the Lord. He began by being a petty thief, and finally he was willing to sell the Savior for a pocketful of money. Again, the point is that little decisions lead to consequences.

That reality is one I'd like to put before us as we turn to the final chapter of the book of Nehemiah. This story has its natural conclusion in chapter 12 on a high note: the dedication of the walls, purification of the leaders, thanksgiving sung by the choir, joy resounding for a great distance, the people assembled before God in the courts of the temple. But there is great wisdom in adding the epilogue, because what we get to see now is Jerusalem years after the high point. We'll learn some important lessons about slow leaks; about decline that is not obvious; about bad decisions that are not made intentionally, high-handedly, or with a stiff neck; but that have bad results nonetheless.

Let's examine chapter 13 of Nehemiah. After the wonderful celebration of chapter 12, verses 6-7a will set the scene for us here:

But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem.

Chapter 1 began in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king. All the efforts Nehemiah made to get permission to travel to Jerusalem, deal with enemies, organize the people, rebuild the wall, set in place a government that was righteous in its inclinations; and the great celebration that took place when the wall was finished all took place that year. Nehemiah ruled for twelve years as governor of the region, and then he returned as a senior official in the court of Artaxerxes in Persia. Now, there's no indication of how long he stayed, but I'm going to make an educated guess. If he was a younger-middle-aged man when he began his career as governor in Judah, he went back at the age of retirement.

Recall, he told Artaxerxes in 2:5, "If it pleases the king, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried...." In the revival that subsequently took place, the Bible became central to the people. They would certainly have read Genesis 49:29-32 where Jacob tells his sons to bury him with his fathers in Canaan. Jacob died in Egypt, but they took his body to be buried in the place of his fathers.

My speculation is that Nehemiah had the same burden. Having read the Law again, having served to the end of his useful service in Artaxerxes' court, he came back years later to the city of Jerusalem at the end of his career, anticipating the end of his life. This was the place where he wanted to end his days, in Israel's royal city.

But what did he find? "While all this was going on," he starts out in verse 6. What had been going on in the city in his absence? The first three verses of chapter 13 describe a renewal effort that was abroad in the greater culture. There was an effort to be the people of God as distinguished from others, to serve God faithfully, and so on. But underneath the broad concern to be the people of God, we find three problems that I want to highlight.

The first problem is in verses 4-5.

"Make no provision for the flesh"

Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.

You probably recognize the name Tobiah. He was one of the two dedicated enemies of the purpose of God in that generation. He stood resolutely against the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the exiles' becoming a people again, and Israel's success as a nation.

There is another name that we encountered again and again throughout the book, starting in chapter 2. Look now at 13:28:

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.

The other man who had been resolute in his opposition to everything Nehemiah stood for and everything God intended was Sanballat.

Curiously, Eliashib the high priest, the spiritual leader of the nation, had in some way or other made alliances with the two men who were most committed as enemies of God's purpose. Of all things, Eliashib had made a place for Tobiah to live in the courts of the temple, an apartment of sorts, perhaps only for him to stay in on his journeys to Jerusalem (it's likely that he lived elsewhere with his own people). And Eliashib's grandson had become related to Sanballat by marriage.

Underneath this concern to do the right thing, the spiritual leadership of the nation was making alliances with her enemies, providing an opening for them, giving them a voice, coming under their influence.

We know further (verse 10ff) that the spiritual leadership of the nation had been narrowed. Many of the Levite singers, priests, scribes, and others had left town, presumably because Eliashib was consolidating power to himself. He was narrowing the circle of influence such that people who responded to him were in charge, and there was no place left for others to lead.

What should we think of Eliashib? Was he a deeply wicked man? Was he a wolf in sheep's clothing? I don't think so. I think Eliashib was a practical man who knew he didn't have the clout that Nehemiah had. He didn't have the armies of the Persian empire at his disposal. He realized that he was going to have to be neighbor to the Horonites of Sanballat and the Ammonites of Tobiah for years to come. It seemed much better to make an alliance with these enemies, to consolidate, to mollify and placate them, in order to go forward. "Let's get them on our side. Let's reduce the tensions. It's good strategy." I think he was more or less a good man who desired to do the right thing but who found himself making deals instead of drawing firm lines where they needed to be drawn.

Romans 13:13-14 says, "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." This version doesn't translate that last phrase very well. The King James Version renders it, do not make "provision for the flesh." This is saying, "Don't make

an apartment in the temple for Tobiah. Don't make a room in the house of your life for the things that trip you up. Don't make a comfortable place that you can easily turn to to hear the voices that will lead you in the wrong direction."

Again, I don't think Eliashib wanted to be wicked, but he didn't want to do battle with what was wrong. He didn't want to resist. Sometimes it's easier to come to a truce of sorts with the problems in our life. I don't want to experience the worst effects of the sins and problems and temptations that plague me, but I'll get by with a pleasant room-temperature version of them. I'll make a deal with the flesh. I'll make provision for sinful opportunity at a later date.

Romans 13 is a warning that Eliashib didn't heed. But we must heed it. Where there are Sanballats and Tobiahs, where there are temptations and patterns of failure and sin in our life, where there are weaknesses that we know we are vulnerable to, we mustn't give the voice an opportunity to influence us.

A second problem Nehemiah discovered when he returned after some years is in verses 15-17.

Watch for slow leaks

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?"

Again, it's easy to imagine how the Sabbath could lose its particularity, how the Jews could make a small compromise once again. "We're living among people who are not Jews. They do business on the Sabbath day. In fact, it's the merchants of Tyre who are doing most of the selling. We aren't so much breaking the Sabbath, we're just buying what they have to sell. Most of what they're selling is food anyway, and food spoils quickly. It's hard to have these firm lines when we're surrounded by people who don't share our convictions about what's important. In our homes we certainly don't break the Sabbath. We don't dig wells in our back yards, and we don't do work inside the house on the Sabbath day. We have our own personal convictions about these matters. But it's so hard to live in a pluralistic society where nobody else restricts themselves in this way. And it's an economic struggle to be different; if we can't sell our wares one day out of seven, what will the outcome be?"

So slowly one market opened, then maybe two or three more. The Gentiles were allowed to sell on the Sabbath day, and then Jews were allowed to buy from the Gentiles, and so on and so on. "Is what we've done so wrong? Is the compromise so horrible after all?" They couldn't see what they were doing until someone who hadn't been there came from a distance and spoke the difficult truth.

I've had a birthmark near my eye all of my life. A friend visited me once after I hadn't seen him for years, and he said, "You know, you ought to have that looked at. I've known you a long time, and the mark is much larger and darker than it used to be." I had no idea. I saw that patch of skin every day. But my friend, who hadn't seen me for years, could see that it had changed. It turned out to be nothing, but the fact that I hadn't noticed the change and he did suggests the kind of problem that slowly develops over time, and you don't realize change is taking place.

Nehemiah could see what these people had lost track of because he had been away and because his heart was fastened on the things of God.

Again, let me make the point that Jerusalem was not in massive rebellion. There is no prophetic voice here denouncing the terrible things they were doing. They were mostly not terrible. They were just sad and less than they ought to be. They were not in unusual economic distress. There were no enemies at the door. God was not judging them. This was not a time when they had gone to the ends of the rebellion that they were capable of. It

wasn't anything like that. They were just compromised. They had made provision for what was sinful.

The third problem Nehemiah found is in verses 23-25. Again, Nehemiah's concern was sparked by what he saw.

Be ruthless

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. I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. 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 or for yourselves."

Here again, if we put it in the best light, we can see how it happened. First of all, Nehemiah's anger was not primarily with young married couples. Nehemiah focused on the fathers who gave their children in marriage. They were the ones whose beards he plucked, whose cheeks he smacked, who received his curses. Marriages in that day were arranged by the parents. Children were told whom they would marry by their father. The marriage would be accomplished, and husband and wife would, hopefully and probably most often, fall in love with the person they married.

But fathers made decisions about whom their children should marry very often for reasons of security, economics, anticipation of what future generations would be like when they were raised, and so on. And again we can imagine some of these fathers. They were poorer than they wished they were. They wanted the best for their children. "It would be much better for my daughter to be married to this well-to-do young man from Ashdod. He'll provide better for her than some poor Israelite. I only want the best for my daughter. We'll moderate whatever problems come up. I love the God of Israel and I'm his servant. I don't mean any harm by this; it's just that these are hard times."

Nehemiah grabbed these fathers and said, "You're trying to provide security for your children by inviting the presence of idols, and your grandchildren cannot even speak your language anymore. And where will their children end up? This is crazy! What in the world were you thinking?" The air was going out of the tire and they were making provision for greater problems to come. And as Nehemiah will argue throughout this chapter, that was exactly how Israel had failed and fallen in previous generations.

We need to trust God rather than our instincts about how to make life come out the way it should. Once again we hear the words of Paul: "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not make provision for the flesh."

Now, a lot of commentators take Nehemiah on here. They're a little embarrassed because Nehemiah seems to overdo it in these encounters. He gets angry: plucking beards and striking blows. Look at verses 6b-7:

Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.

He didn't just say, "Tobiah, you're going to have to leave. You've got a month to get your things out of here." He threw Tobiah out, grabbed his things and tossed them out, and fumigated the place. He didn't want the rooms of the temple to smell like Tobiah. He didn't want any memory of Tobiah in there.

Look what he did with the problem of the Sabbath-breaking. Verses 17-19a:

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."

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.

He didn't just say, "Stop doing this." He slammed the doors in people's faces. Verses 19b-21:

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."

He not only slammed doors, he got mad at them. He said, "You can't even come and camp outside so that you can be first in after the Sabbath. If you're camping outside, it means that you are looking for a way to get around the restrictions."

Now, why was Nehemiah so ruthless? Why did he fumigate the apartment? Why did he refuse the campers? Why did he pluck the beards of fathers? Why did he overreact? I think it's precisely to make a point. He wasn't just crotchety in his old age. He knew that compromise starts very small. You begin in Minnesota with little streams, but you end up in Louisiana with the Mississippi, miles wide. You start out with little decisions, small compromises, little alliances, little pamperings, minor pilferings. The first time Judas stole from the bag, he stole only a little bit.

But he stole more and more, and finally he sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver. There needs to be ruthlessness toward provision for the flesh, sinful patterns, the little compromises. We need to help each other draw lines. "The tire is leaking, deal with it." "Turn off the faucet before you start mopping the floor. Deal with the problem back where it begins." That's the point Nehemiah was making.

Let me ask some questions. Is there someone, a friend or associate, who makes it easy for you to regard small dishonesties, little fudgings and falsehoods, as the normal way of the world? Is there someone you flirt with consistently or often think of in inappropriate ways? Is there a hobby or fascination that consistently commands way too much of your time and attention? Is there a social commentator to whom you listen who often stirs up loveless anger or prejudice in you? Do you rely too much on money to secure your future?

Now, your flesh is going to be weak in areas particular to you. I know a friend who has decided to stop vacationing at the beach. He said, "I can't go to the beach to vacation anymore because I have a real problem with women in bathing suits. So I'm going to go to the mountains on vacation." That's his own weakness. No one should suggest universal abstention from vacationing at the beach. We each need to be hard on ourselves in our own pattern of weakness. Maybe it's money. Maybe it's anger. Maybe it's a combination of things that set you off. But the call of the passage before us is to deal with the problem at its source.

God will remember your faithfulness

One last observation about chapter 13: Three times Nehemiah prays. Verse 14: "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services." Verse 22: "Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love." And then the very last sentence of the entire book, verse 30:

"Remember me with favor, O my God."

These prayers reveal an attitude toward life. Nehemiah could have built a monument to himself. He could have written the inscription on the wall of Jerusalem: "BUILT BY NEHEMIAH THE GREAT." He could have looked back at his life and wanted his memory or his sense of accomplishment to be in the things he had done. Or he could have been frustrated because the people he had trained hadn't lived up to the training he had given them. He had given them a path to follow, and they had veered off from it. And I'm sure he knew as an old man that whatever reforms he instituted would not last very long beyond his death. The next generation would

compromise, too. So he could have either been impressed with his past or discouraged about his present.

But he chose neither of those things. He said, "Lord, you see me now." His request for God to remember means to pay attention. The prayer "O God, remember me and what I've done" assumes that God knows because he pays attention. Nehemiah was saying, "Lord, there will come a day when all of this will be over anyway. I want the meaning of my life to be anchored in the future, in your memory of the battles that we've fought together, of the faith I've lived out. I want my life to have direction and reality based on your presence now and your memory in the future, when I will be with you and all this will be past, of the heart you formed in me."

The way to "make no provision for the flesh," to have the kind of courage and ruthlessness to deal with those kinds of compromise, is this: to know a time is coming when we'll be rewarded by the Lord and embraced by him, when he will remember the heart that beats within us. Nehemiah's short prayers in this chapter say as much about him as anything else. "Lord, I'm living for that day. You remember. When I stand before you, speak to me of the battles we fought and the life that I lived, uncompromised, caring for what matters to you."

Except where noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Catalog No. 4620
Nehemiah 13:1-30
Tenth Message
Steve Zeisler
August 15, 1999

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1999 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.

