

BEN WASHINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH

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Wednesday Noon Bible Study

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The Book of Nehemiah – Chapter 12 and 13

CHAPTER 12

Dedication of the Wall

Priestly and Levitical families.

(Nehemiah 12:1-11) Priests and Levites in the days of Zerubbabel, the high priest.

Now these are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Amariah, Malluch, Hattush, Shechaniah, Rehum, Meremoth, Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah, Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah, Shemaiah, Joiarib, Jedaiah, Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah, and Jedaiah. These were the heads of the priests and their brethren in the days of Jeshua. Moreover the Levites were Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and Mattaniah who led the thanksgiving psalms, he and his brethren. Also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brethren, stood across from them in their duties. Jeshua begot Joiakim, Joiakim begot Eliashib, Eliashib begot Joiada, Joiada begot Jonathan, and Jonathan begot Jaddua.

(Nehemiah 12:12-21) Priests in the days of Joiakim.

Now in the days of Joiakim, the priests, the heads of the fathers' houses were: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah; of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan; of Melichu, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph; of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai; of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam; of Abijah, Zichri; the son of Minjamin; of Moadiah, Piltai; of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan; of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi; of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber; of Hilkiyah, Hashabiah; and of Jedaiah, Nethanel.

(Nehemiah 12:22-26) Levites during the reign of Darius the Persian.

During the reign of Darius the Persian, a record was also kept of the Levites and priests who had been heads of their fathers' houses in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, Johanan, and Jaddua. The sons of Levi, the heads of the fathers' houses until the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib, were written in the book of the chronicles. And the heads of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers across from them, to praise and give thanks, group alternating with group, according to the command of David the man of God. Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, and Akkub were gatekeepers keeping the watch at the storerooms of the gates. These lived in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor, and of Ezra the priest, the scribe.

The dedication ceremony.

(Nehemiah 12:27-29) Gathering the Levites for the dedication ceremony.

Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps. And the sons of the singers gathered together from the

countryside around Jerusalem, from the villages of the Netophathites, from the house of Gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth; for the singers had built themselves villages all around Jerusalem.

The Levites had many responsibilities in the life and worship of Israel, but one of the most important jobs they had was to **lead the people in songs of worship and praise to God.**

Mostly, they did not sing without musical instruments. Here they specifically mention cymbals and stringed instruments and harps.

- There are at least twenty-two different musical instruments mentioned in the Bible, including the harp, the lyre (an ancient guitar), horns, trumpets, flutes, tambourines, drums, cymbals, and bells.

Sons of the singers... the singers had built themselves villages: There were also specially appointed singers. The singers in Nehemiah's day had a close-knit bond, both by families and living arrangements.

- Since the job of these singers was to lead the people in worship of God, they had to be good singers; but more importantly, they had to be people of worship themselves.

There is a huge difference between being a great singer and being a great leader of songs of worship to God. **Worship should be excellent, but it isn't entertainment.** The goal isn't to give the people a good feeling (though that may happen), but to give glory and honor to God.

(Nehemiah 12:30) Purification.

Then the priests and Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, the gates, and the wall.

Then the priests and Levites purified themselves: They did this first. They could not effectively lead the people in worship of God unless they walked in purity before the Lord.

And purified the people: This was their next step. They brought cleansing to the people the way the Bible said to, knowing that only a purified people could really worship and praise God.

- Without purity, we can't worship God in spirit and in truth, as Jesus commanded us to (John 4:24). Psalm 24:3-4 asks, Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, and it means it in the sense of bringing praise to God.
- Purification rituals in the Old Testament were meant to help illustrate our need for forgiveness from sin. Inner purity is required to enter God's presence. This set of questions and answers shows that God cares about a person's heart, not just the outward ritual of cleansing.
- We can be made pure and clean before God today, right now, by doing what the Bible says to do — not in following an Old Testament ceremony, but by receiving the word of the New Testament: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Third, **their surroundings were purified.** Purified surroundings help us to walk in purity consistently. The homes and offices of many Christians could use a good purification and cleansing.

What is the meaning and importance of purification in the Bible?

Purification, the act of ceremonial or spiritual cleansing, is an important biblical theme. In the Old Testament, God required purification rituals, such as washing with water, to make sinful people and defiled objects acceptable to Him. These rituals pointed to a more profound spiritual reality. The significance of purification is that it symbolized the holiness of God, the sinfulness of people, and the necessity of Jesus Christ's death on the cross for sin.

Purification rituals weren't merely functional, like scrubbing dirt off one's hands or cleaning food residue from a utensil. Its deeper meaning was relational, symbolizing God's holiness and the need to remove the stain of sin. This is why God told His people, "Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong" (Isaiah 1:16). Washing with water symbolized the removal of evil from within a person.

Ultimately, all the purification rituals in the law pointed to Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews explains: "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason, it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship" (Hebrews 10:1). God never intended the law, including the purification rituals it prescribed, to take away sin. Forgiveness comes only through Jesus. He is the reality behind the law's shadows: "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

(Nehemiah 12:31-43) Two choirs lead Jerusalem in joyful praise.

So I brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall, and appointed two large thanksgiving choirs. One went to the right hand on the wall toward the Refuse Gate. After them went Hoshai and half of the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, and some of the priests' sons with trumpets; Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Michaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, and his brethren, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. Ezra the scribe went before them. By the Fountain Gate, in front of them, they went up the stairs of the City of David, on the stairway of the wall, beyond the house of David, as far as the Water Gate eastward. The other thanksgiving choir went the opposite way, and I was behind them with half of the people on the wall, going past the Tower of the Ovens as far as the Broad Wall, and above the Gate of Ephraim, above the Old Gate, above the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate; and they stopped by the Gate of the Prison. So the two thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God, likewise I and the half of the rulers with me; and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Minjamin, Michaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. The singers sang loudly with Jezrahiah the director. Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.

The two large choirs were called thanksgiving choirs for good reason. All praise and worship must have a strong element of thanksgiving to God for it to be genuine.

- God made them rejoice with great joy: God did this with the choirs assembled, and the people spread all about. They were then overwhelmed with joy and thanksgiving, considering all God had done.
- This tremendous experience of worship was for everyone. There weren't some who weren't able to worship.

(Nehemiah 12:44-47) Other aspects of this day of joy.

And at the same time some were appointed over the rooms of the storehouse for the offerings, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions specified by the Law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered. Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son. For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, a portion for each day. They also consecrated holy things for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated them for the children of Aaron.

Some were appointed over the rooms of the storehouse for the offerings: This was a day of giving. People brought their offerings, firstfruits, tithes to the storehouse of the Levites, and they did it with joy because they enjoyed supporting the priests and Levites ministering on their behalf.

Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification: This was a day of purity. It was an ongoing concern, not a one-time ceremony.

They also consecrated holy things for the Levites: It was a day of consecration. Holy things were set apart for the Levites, speaking of the separation unto God.

CHAPTER 13

Nehemiah's Reforms

True worship leads to the nation's obedience.

(Nehemiah 13:1-2) Hearing the law brings a call to obedience.

On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God, because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing.

No Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God: As the people drew near to God in worship (as seen in Nehemiah 11 and 12), they became aware of God's standards. In this case the standard stated in Deuteronomy 23:3-4, where the Ammonites and Moabites were not to be regarded as part of Israel (unless they converted to the worship of Israel's God).

This meant to be regarded as one of the people of Israel and people of God. It meant one could fully participate in the spiritual life of Israel.

- An Israelite was part of God's covenant by birth; but an Ammonite or Moabite was not. They had to become a part of the covenant by choice — by joining with God's covenant people and leaving the gods of their people. They had to choose to reject those gods and embrace Yahweh.
- This command was a powerful message. It said to these Ammonites and Moabites, "You were not a part of the people of God by birth. You must choose this and leave the thinking and deeds of your anti-God culture, and truly join in the spiritual life of God's people. Unless you leave one and join the other, you will never really be a part of this spiritual life. Come join us!"

Because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water: The Ammonites and Moabites were singled out because of their devious schemes against Israel when Israel came into the promised land — at least a thousand years before this.

- Long before, the Ammonites and Moabites had schemed against Israel, God had made a promise to the father of the Jewish people, Abraham: I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you (Genesis 12:3). This command was simply another fulfillment of this promise.

However, our God turned the curse into a blessing: This refers to the events of Numbers 22-24, where God blessed Israel, even though the prophet Balaam wanted to curse them. It also reminds us that God is able — more than able — to turn any curse into a blessing.

(Nehemiah 13:3) After hearing God's command, Israel obeys and separates from the mixed multitude.

So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.

They could have thought of 20 reasons to not do what the word of God plainly told them to do. Instead, they simply obeyed.

Even today, there may be people of good will in churches; honorable people, who have some respect for God and His word. Yet they are part of the mixed multitude because they have not received God's covenant of salvation in Jesus. Such people are welcome, but it should be understood where they stand.

Nehemiah's reforms.

(Nehemiah 13:4-9) Temple reforms.

Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, was allied with Tobiah. And he had prepared for him a large room, where previously they had stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, the tithes of grain, the new wine and oil, which were commanded to be given to the Levites and singers and gatekeepers, and the offerings for the priests. But during all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Then after certain days I obtained leave from the king, and I came to Jerusalem and discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room. Then I commanded them to cleanse the rooms; and I brought back into them the articles of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

This section indicates that Nehemiah left Jerusalem and went back to his duties in the Persian court. He was gone from Jerusalem for anywhere from 10 to 12 years.

I came to Jerusalem and discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah: When Nehemiah came back, he saw that Eliashib the priest had entered into agreements with one of the enemies of Nehemiah's work of rebuilding the wall — the man named Tobiah.

- Incidentally, Tobiah was an Ammonite (Nehemiah 2:10) — one of the very mixed multitude that had been put out of the assembly of God's people some 10 years before. At this point in the record of Nehemiah, Tobiah was not only present among the assembly, he actually rented rooms in the temple courts (preparing a room for him in the courts).

Apparently, Tobiah had not changed over the years. He did not join the people of God in the terms of His covenant. The problem was evident to Nehemiah — but Eliashib was completely blind to it.

And it grieved me bitterly: There were many reasons why this was so distressing to Nehemiah.

- It grieved him because rooms in the courts of the temple of God were being occupied by a man not only a pagan, but who also had a history of actively opposing God's work in the days of Nehemiah.
- It grieved him because it reflected so badly on Eliashib (a man who was a spiritual leader in Israel) and those around him. It showed that if Eliashib was blind to a problem area, there was also no one around him who could confront him with the problem.
- It grieved him because it made Nehemiah question the lasting value of the spiritual revival he witnessed when last in Jerusalem.

Therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room: Nehemiah wasn't one to only sit back and grieve. He took action.

He threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the rooms he occupied in the temple courts.

He ceremonially cleansed the rooms.

He put the rooms back to their proper use — as storerooms for the sacred things of the temple.

(Nehemiah 13:10-14) Financial reforms.

I also realized that the portions for the Levites had not been given them; for each of the Levites and the singers who did the work had gone back to his field. So I contended with the rulers, and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their place. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouse Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah; and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and their task was to distribute to their brethren. 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 its services!

The people did not obey God's word regarding giving. Because of the lack of support, those who should give their time to the service of God and His people (the Levites and the singers) could not — and they had to leave that service (had gone back to his field).

Why is the house of God forsaken: The lack of giving was a way of forsaking the house of God. It wasn't just unhelpful to the Levites and the singers; it was a way of turning their back on God.

Nehemiah set the situation right by expecting the Levites and the singers to recommit to the work of serving God and His people as they should. He also reorganized the collection, accounting, and distribution of the people's tithes and gifts.

(Nehemiah 13:15-22) Priority reform.

In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions. Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath." So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day. Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. Then I warned them, and said to them, "Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!" From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!

In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath: The Sabbath was being ignored in disobedience to God's clear command under the Old Covenant. On the Sabbath day when they were supposed to rest and trust God, foreigners sold, and the people of Israel bought.

- At the root, this was a problem of priorities. There was nothing wrong with buying and selling, only when the desire to buy and sell, to make money or spend money, became more important than honoring God. This was a clear way the people of Israel put making and spending money before glorifying God.
- The New Testament makes it clear we are not under the law of the Sabbath in the same sense Israel was under the Old Covenant (Colossians 2:16-17); but we are certainly under the same obligation to make honoring God more important than making money or spending money.

Nehemiah knew that sin was not only a personal issue. When such open sin is winked at and left uncorrected among God's people, it invites the correcting hand of God.

- Nehemiah wasn't going to sit still for this; he threatened If you do so again, I will lay hands on you! He did not mean the gentle laying on of hands for prayer, but the rough laying on of hands for correction.

(Nehemiah 13:23-31a) Relationship reform.

In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people. So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin. Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?" And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I drove him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service, and to bringing the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times.

In the years Nehemiah was away the Israelites had resumed their practice of intermarrying with the pagan nations surrounding them. This was in dramatic disobedience to God's command.

From this strong reaction of Nehemiah, we gather he considered this to be the most dangerous of their sins — pursuing ungodly romance, and getting involved in romantic relationships God had said "no" to.

- His example of Solomon is well taken (Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things... pagan women caused even him to sin). If Solomon, one of the wisest and most blessed men ever, sinned with unwise and ungodly romance then no one else should consider themselves invulnerable.

(Nehemiah 13:31b) Conclusion: Nehemiah's clear conscience.

Remember me, O my God, for good!

At the end of it all, Nehemiah knew he did his best to make the people of God strong, safe, and secure. Beyond that, he also led them to be pure, worshipful, and obedient.

Yet, Nehemiah certainly carried a sense of failure. In Nehemiah 10 the people made a solemn covenant to God that they would not do three things.

Have ungodly romantic relationships (Nehemiah 10:30).

Buy and sell on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 10:31).

Fail to support the work of God with money as He commanded (Nehemiah 10:32-39).

Nevertheless, in Nehemiah 13, some 10 to 12 years later, Israel was again steeped in the exact sins they vowed to stop. Nehemiah had to address the problems of ungodly romantic relationships (Nehemiah 13:23-31), buying and selling on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15-22), and failing to support the work of God as He commanded (Nehemiah 13:10-14).

In Nehemiah 10:39 the people promised: we will not neglect the house of our God. But later in Nehemiah 13:11, **Nehemiah had to ask:** Why is the house of God forsaken? It was forsaken because Israel did not keep its promises before God.

- This makes a point vividly clear: the law — that is, rules, vows, promises, covenants, and the such, are all ultimately powerless to stop sin. Only the grace of God, alive and flowing in our lives, can give us the power to truly overcome sin.
- Paul expressed this in Romans 8:3, among other places: For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. Too many Christians look for victory in the making of rules, of vows, of promises — and fail to find it, because all those things tend to make us look to ourselves, instead of looking to Jesus.

The Old Testament history of Israel, from beginning to end, illustrates this. When the nation was first born at the Exodus, despite the most spectacular miracles, displays of God's glory, and revelation of the law, the people sinned, by crediting a gold calf with their deliverance from Egypt! And now here, at the end of the Old Testament history of God's people in the promised land, Nehemiah is pulling hair out — his own and those of sinners — because they couldn't keep their promises to God.

If we could be saved by our own promises, by our own commitment to Jesus, then His death would have been noble, but unnecessary. We aren't saved by some vow we make, or some leaf we turn over, but by trusting in who Jesus is, and what He has done to save us.