

# ***“Nehemiah: A Case Study in Vigilance”***

**NEHEMIAH 13:1-31**

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Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
May 6, 2012**



This morning I would like for us to study a lesson on the importance of vigilance. The word itself comes from Latin and literally refers to the ability to stay awake. Psychologists define the term as the ability to maintain attention and alertness over prolonged periods of time. Most of my trouble staying awake comes during movies. In fact, sometimes I refer to going to a movie in a theater as “an \$8 nap.” This past Friday evening, our family went to the drive-in theater over in Jefferson, and what is really hard at the drive-in is that they offer two movies. We usually start out with the best of intentions. We get in for \$8, and we know that if we can stay awake during both movies, that our cost per movie has gone down to only \$4! We are out there in the lawn chairs, we are all bundled up, we wait for the sun to go down so the movie can start, it finally gets started around 9 o’clock or so, and we are really excited about it, but then we start to drift off partway through the first movie. But then we get to the break between the two movies – the break usually comes around 11 o’clock – and then we are wide-awake. We’ve got to make it! We’ve got to get our money’s worth! But then, of course, the movie starts, and some of us are sound asleep within just a few minutes. What we need, there, is a good dose of vigilance, the ability to stay awake, the ability to be alert, the ability to stay focused.

For just a few minutes this morning, I would like for us to study the importance of vigilance in a spiritual sense, and to do this, I would like for us to study an interesting scene that played out in the life of a man in the Old Testament, a man by the name of Nehemiah. In our Sunday morning adult Bible class, we have been studying some of the events leading up to the Babylonian Captivity. As we know from class, the two southern tribes had drifted away from God, so God allowed them to be conquered and taken away by the Babylonians. In fact, it happened exactly as God had promised in the book of Deuteronomy, more than 800 years earlier. Well, the people were taken away, but after 70 seventy years, God allowed them to return. They came back in several waves. In the book of Ezra, for example, we read about a group coming back under the leadership of Ezra the scribe. They came back and they restored worship in the temple. Several years later, though, another group came back under the leadership of Nehemiah. By this time, Nehemiah was serving in the administration of the king of Persia. He was the king’s cupbearer. Nevertheless, Nehemiah asked the king’s permission to return to go check on his people, and when he got back to Jerusalem, Nehemiah was thrilled by the progress that had been made by the others, but he was extremely concerned that the city with its newly-restored temple did not have the protection of a wall. The wall had been torn down many years earlier. With the blessing of the king of Persia, then, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem as a governor and rebuilt the walls around the city of Jerusalem. We studied this back in April 2001 (so I’m sure you all remember this), but Nehemiah and the

people rebuilt the walls while they were under threat of enemy attack. In fact, the Bible says that they built with one hand while holding a weapon in the other (Nehemiah 4:17). It was a 24/7 project, and the Bible tells us that they finished in 52 days.

While Nehemiah was there, he also made some serious progress with several moral issues as well. The people had gone many years without the word of God. Nehemiah, then, helped not only with the restoration of the wall, but also with the restoration of the nation spiritually. Ezra the scribe arranged to have the Law read publicly, the people confess their sins and repent, they have a huge celebration, and then Nehemiah has the entire nation reaffirm their covenant with God, that they would follow all aspects of the Law of Moses. Specifically, in Chapter 10, the people make a fourfold promise: 1.) We will not allow our children to marry the locals, 2.) We will not buy or sell on the Sabbath Day, 3.) We will faithfully give 10% of our income in order to take care of the priests (the Levites), and 4.) We will not allow God's temple to be neglected.

Well, these things are great, and yet let us just say that Nehemiah's work was not done. After being in Jerusalem for a number of years, Nehemiah went back to finish his work for the king of Persia, just as he had promised the king that he would. So, Nehemiah left Jerusalem for Persia. I was going to ask, "What would you think if our Governor had to go live in a foreign country for the next ten years," but I realize that some here this morning might actually like that! Nevertheless, Governor Nehemiah left for Persia. After about ten years, he realized that he was getting old, he wanted to be buried in the land of his fathers, so he asked the King of Persia for permission and once again returned to the city of Jerusalem. That brings us to Nehemiah 13, the last chapter in the book. We would love to think that Nehemiah came back home and had a relaxing retirement. We would love to think that Nehemiah spent the rest of his life relaxing by the pool, sleeping in, napping at will, but that is not exactly what happened! As we study the need for vigilance, let us please consider several scenes from the last few years of Governor Nehemiah – Nehemiah 13:1-31 (p. 787),

***1 On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 2 because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3 So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel. 4 Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah, 5 had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. 6 But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king, 7 and I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. 8 It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. 9 Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense.***

***10 I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field. 11 So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts. 12 All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine and oil into the storehouses. 13 In charge of the storehouses I appointed Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and in addition to them***

*was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered reliable, and it was their task to distribute to their kinsmen. 14 Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.*

*15 In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food. 16 Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the Sabbath, even in Jerusalem. 17 Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the Sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath." 19 It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the Sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates so that no load would enter on the Sabbath day. 20 Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. 21 Then I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you." From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. 22 And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the Sabbath day. For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness.*

*23 In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. 24 As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people. 25 So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. 26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin. 27 Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?" 28 Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me. 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.*

*30 Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, 31 and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.*

As we look at this final chapter in the book of Nehemiah, I would like for us to consider the four departures from the faith that Nehemiah had to deal with, and then I would like to apply this chapter to our situation right here in Madison, roughly 2500 years later.

- I. But first of all, we need to at least **BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE WHAT HAPPENED HERE.**

What we find in this chapter is that the people left God in the exact ways that they had just solemnly promised (roughly 10 years earlier) that they would never do. Many Bibles make this easy for us by dividing this chapter into paragraphs. In the pew Bibles, I noticed that the translators even gave us some little headings. Look at those headings, and then remember: The people promised 1.) That they would never allow God's temple to be neglected, 2.) That they would faithfully give 10% of their income in order to take care of the priests, 3.) That they would never buy or sell on the Sabbath Day, and 4.) That they would always remain separate by never allowing their children to marry the locals. And yet we look at these four paragraphs, and we find that the people broke every single oath that they had made to God.

**A. Notice, please, first of all, that the people had allowed God's temple to be desecrated.**

Notice what happened: In verse 4, we read about Eliashib, the priest, the man who was responsible for maintaining God's temple. And then we read about second man, a man by the name of Tobiah. If we were to read earlier in the book of Nehemiah, we would find that Tobiah was not even a Jew. In Nehemiah 4:10, we find that Tobiah was an Ammonite, descendants of the daughters of Lot, long-time enemies of God's people. In that verse, we find that Tobiah was mad that Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem at all. Tobiah was upset that anyone would come to check on the welfare of the city. In Chapter 2:19, when Tobiah heard about the plans to rebuild the wall, the Bible says that he mocked and despised Nehemiah for making those plans. In Chapter 4:3, as the wall was being completed, Tobiah publicly made fun of the work they were doing. He said, ***"Even what they are building — if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!"*** In Chapter 4:7-8, Tobiah conspired with others to take up arms and actually fight against the work that Nehemiah was doing. Tobiah was the reason why the people had to work with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. In Chapter 6:19, we are told that Tobiah sent threatening letters to frighten Nehemiah in the work he was doing. Tobiah, therefore, was an incredibly evil man.

But notice: By the time Nehemiah gets back after those ten years, Eliashib (the high priest) had prepared an apartment for Tobiah inside the temple! So here we have an evil, violent, unholy, pagan man being invited into God's temple, into at least one of those rooms that should have been used for the various offerings that should have been collected regularly throughout the year. Here we have one of God's greatest enemies being given the keys to God's house, being invited right in the front door, being given an apartment in the most sacred space on the face of this earth.

For just a moment, I thought this might be like us looking at our finances and deciding maybe to rent out a room in this building to some pornographers or something, "Hey, come on in! This room right here would make a nice backdrop for that little movie you're making." But then I thought: That's not really a perfect parallel, is it? Under the New Covenant, we don't have a temple; but rather, we are the temples! So a better parallel might be any one of us as Christians allowing those unclean thoughts into our own hearts. That would be a much better comparison.

So now (back in Chapter 13:7), Nehemiah gets back and learns about this arrangement, he learns that there is basically a fox in the henhouse, and in verse 8, he gets angry and personally throws all of Tobiah's stuff out of the room. And then, in verse 9, they literally fumigate the place, they clean it out, they purify it. And before we move on from this first incident, I would remind you that Nehemiah is in good company. We remember someone else who cleaned out the temple. In the gospel accounts, we find that Jesus did it twice – once near the beginning of His ministry, and once near the end. But on two occasions, the Lord physically and violently

removed moneychangers from the temple courtyard. Of course, there is no physical temple today; instead, as Christians, we are the temple. The lesson, then, is that we must remove the sin from our lives.

**B. As we move forward in Nehemiah 13, we notice in the next paragraph that the people had not only desecrated the temple, but they had also neglected their tithes and offerings, even to the point where the Levites could no longer dedicate themselves to full-time work.**

Again, remember: The people had promised to faithfully give 1/10<sup>th</sup> of their income to support the Lord's work, but in verses 10-14, we find that they had fallen behind. In fact, they were so behind, that the priests could no longer support themselves and their families by working full-time in the temple, so they all had to flee to the fields to make a living. There is certainly nothing wrong with farming – not at all, but God's plan was for the people to support the Levites so that they could devote all of their attention to spiritual matters. But since the people were stealing from God by not giving properly, the Lord's work suffered, the temple was neglected, and the spiritual neglect contributed to this downward spiral. The less the people gave, the less they learned about God, and it kept on getting worse and worse.

I would point out here that this is one very good example of how our giving is directly connected to our spiritual health. In the New Testament (in 2 Corinthians 9:1), our giving is described by Paul as being the proof of our love for God. That's why (if you notice the front of our bulletin each week), we have a section labeled "Our Attitude." That's where we put our attendance and contribution figures. Certainly our giving is not the only measure of our attitude, but the Bible certainly teaches that cheerful and sacrificial giving is a proof of our love for God. We might not always think about it that way, but the Bible teaches that our giving is a direct reflection of how we are doing spiritually. And in our passage this morning, we find that the people are not doing well at all.

However, when Nehemiah gets back, he sees what is happening, and he once again makes things right. He confronts the officials, he puts responsible people in charge of the situation, and the funds are once again distributed to the Levites. Notice: Nehemiah did not whine, and moan, and complain, he didn't just stand there wringing his hands, but he took steps to make things right immediately. From time to time, then, we also need to reevaluate not only the amount that we give, but also the attitude that motivates our giving. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:21, ***"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*** Nehemiah, therefore, fixed this problem just as he did with the temple situation.

**C. As we continue, we also find that the people were neglecting the Sabbath Day.**

Starting in verse 15, as Nehemiah comes home, he notices that some were working their wine presses, others were hauling grain and all kinds of stuff, and people were buying and selling, and these things were happening on the day when God said that no work should be done. So, ten years earlier the people had promised to honor the Sabbath, but here they were, completely ignoring what God had told them to do. Nehemiah, then, comes in and reprimands the leaders. In verse 17, he calls what they are doing ***"evil,"*** and then he reminds them that this is the exact behavior that led to the 70 years in captivity in the first place. And to make sure that the Law was followed, Nehemiah ordered the gates of the city to be locked shut at sundown on Friday evening. Well, there were some merchants who camped out right outside the gate. It was almost as if they didn't quite think Nehemiah was serious, almost as if they were looking for some kind of loophole. And so at that point, Nehemiah threatened those men with violence. He says: If you do this again, ***"I will use force against you."*** He then commissioned several of the Levites as official gatekeepers, men who would enforce the Law.

Of course, we are no longer under the Law of Moses today, but we are under a Law that brings with it a judgment that is far more severe. And when it comes to honoring God, we also have a special day. We are not told to refrain from working on Sunday, but we are commanded to assemble together with God's people. The Lord's Day assembly is not optional. In this assembly, we listen to the word of God, we pray together as a congregation, we give, we sing, and we partake of the Lord's Supper. Today, we need men and women and teens and children with the courage to say: No matter what happens, we will honor the Lord's Day.

But back to Nehemiah: Nehemiah saw that God's people were ignoring God on God's day, and Nehemiah put an end to it. Nehemiah took steps to encourage the people to put God first.

**D. And then at the end of the chapter, we find that Nehemiah also discovers that the Jewish men were giving their sons and daughters to the local pagans in marriage.**

And again, this is something that they had all promised they would not do just ten years earlier. But here they were only ten years later, and the children born into those marriages were growing up having learned the language of Ashdod. And the point here is: The children were not learning Hebrew, and so they had no way of learning God's Law on their own. They were growing up with one parent being a Jew and one parent being a pagan idol worshiper. In fact, the Ammonites and Moabites were those who sometimes sacrificed their children to the gods. And what really got Nehemiah here was that the idol worshipers were winning the battles concerning how the children were being raised religiously. Just a few years earlier, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod were those who were plotting together to attack the people as they repaired and rebuilt the walls, and now the fathers of Israel were giving their daughters in marriage to these wicked, evil men!

Of course, when Nehemiah sees this, he is irate – not so much at the young married couples as he is at the fathers. The fathers were the ones who arranged the marriages. They wanted someone who could provide for their daughters. And so the text tells us that Nehemiah fought with the fathers and cursed them and that he yanked out some of their beard hair! Nehemiah was smacking them around! Under Ezra, they had a national investigation and forced these couples to separate (even those with children), but the emphasis here is on the fathers who arranged these marriages. The fathers, of course, were probably thinking in terms of financial and political stability for their children and grandchildren, but Nehemiah knew that these kinds of arrangements led to the downfall of King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived. These kinds of arrangements led to the captivity in the first place. And so we find that Nehemiah is irate. The people had once again violated God's Law, and Nehemiah was willing to do something about it.

**II. As we look back over this chapter, we find, then, several departures from the faith, several departures from God's plan. At this time, I would like for us to at least briefly consider WHAT THIS PASSAGE REALLY MEANS FOR THOSE OF US ASSEMBLED HERE TODAY. What does this passage mean for this congregation? What do the words of this chapter mean for us?**

**A. I would suggest, first of all, a warning – a clear message from the past – about the danger of gradual compromise.**

As most of us know, going from a saved to a lost condition does not happen immediately. Very rarely will a faithful Christian wake up one morning and say, "You know, I've had enough of this. From this point on, I will no longer be faithful to God." But rather, it usually happens over time with a long line of gradual compromises, just giving in a little bit here and there. Perhaps we could compare it to the slow leak on a tire. Most flat tires

are not huge blowouts; but rather, we usually run over a nail or something, or maybe the rims get corroded, or whatever, and the air leaks out very slowly, sometimes over hours or even days. Some of you know that I had an uncle who worked for NASA down in Huntsville, Alabama. He passed away back in 2004, but before he died he gave me a piece of the foam that was used on the bottom of the space shuttle. I will pass this around in just a moment, but I want us to think about the fact that a small piece of foam like this was able to take down an entire shuttle. Like many of you, I can remember where I was on February 1, 2003 (a Saturday morning). I was eating breakfast at a hotel, getting ready to preach at the church in Lynchburg, Tennessee. And reports started coming in that the Space Shuttle Columbia had been lost in a horrible accident, with debris spread out for hundreds of miles. As time went on, investigators determined that a small piece of foam had damaged some tiles during liftoff and had caused the shuttle to disintegrate and burn up during reentry. So there is an example of something fairly small leading to a horrible catastrophe. And that is the way it is with our Christian faith – the danger of gradual compromise over a long period of time. The same thing goes for the O-ring on the Challenger. I was at home sick from middle school when that happened. But those small things can have a huge impact, especially over time.

Think about the people under Nehemiah. One moment they were weeping, and begging God’s forgiveness, and making promises, and just a few years later they had God’s greatest enemy actually living in the temple, they had slowly cut back on their contributions to the point where the Levites had to go into secular work just to support their families, they were busy doing business on the Sabbath Day, and they had given their daughters in marriage to pagan men who loved sacrificing their to pagan gods. Just a few changes here and there over a period of only ten years!

As a congregation, then, we cannot afford to ignore sin in the congregation – even just a little bit. This chapter tells us that it starts small and gets worse over time. So, let us not negotiate with sin, let us not sweep things under the rug, but let us be careful!

**B. There is a second lesson in this chapter, and it comes in the fact that Nehemiah’s zeal (or passion for God) allowed him (or caused him) to react decisively.**

Too often, we may see something that needs to be done, and the temptation is to just hope the problem goes away. It is much easier to just ignore something. But notice what Nehemiah did. First of all, he recognized sin as being sin, “Hey, this is wrong!” He rebuked and reprimanded. Then, secondly, Nehemiah proposed a solution, “This is sin, and we need to stop it.” And then, thirdly, Nehemiah actually handled the problem – he threw a bunch of stuff out on the sidewalk, he locked the city gates, he kicked out the overnight campers who were trying to beat the system, he pulled out some guy’s beard hair, and really, whatever else needed to be done, Nehemiah did it, and he did it immediately.

As we think about what Nehemiah did, I hope we see something in his attitude that we can imitate. When it comes to dealing with sin, let us do what needs to be done. We can hope it goes away, but as we have learned from Nehemiah, sin will not go away on its own. If it’s sin in our own lives, let’s kick it out. If it’s sin in the life of a Christian friend, then let us have the courage to do what the Bible tells us to do. Let us confront firmly, with love.

**C. There is a third lesson in this chapter, and it comes in the form of a reminder that it is never too late to do what is right.**



As we think about the people: Even though they had really done some terrible things, notice that they were not disqualified from turning around. In other words, for those who heard Nehemiah's warnings, if they turned back to God, God was willing to forgive. They had done some horrible things. They had brought pagan worship into the temple, they had ignored their giving, they had ignored the Sabbath, they had offered their children to pagan idols, and yet what they had done in the past did not keep them from doing what was right in the present. But rather, doing right was an ongoing choice. No matter what we've done in the past, at every point in life we have a choice. Yes, we might have really messed up yesterday, but what about today. I'm thinking of what Joshua said in Joshua 24:14-15, ***"Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."*** Ultimately, life is just a long series of choices, and there is never a wrong time to do the right thing.

**D. And then there is one other thing I'd like to point out from this chapter, and that is: Nehemiah had the amazing habit of almost continually going to God in prayer.**

A big part of this (in practical terms) is the reminder that we are not in this alone. But really, all through the book, Nehemiah cries out to God, from beginning to end. It starts in Chapter 1:4, when Nehemiah hears about the condition of the walls, ***"When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven,"*** ...and it goes on from there, picking up with Chapter 4:4. When the enemies harassed them for building the wall, Nehemiah immediately replied, ***"Hear, O our God, for we are despised,"*** and so on. They were getting tired in the middle of the work (in Chapter 6), and Nehemiah responded, ***"O God, strengthen my hands."*** We get to Chapter 9, and the entire chapter is a prayer – a prayer confessing the people's sins to God. And then we get to Chapter 13. You might have noticed, throughout the chapter, how Nehemiah kept saying, ***"Remember me, O my God."*** Prayer, then, gave Nehemiah the courage he needed to keep on making the right choices. And the book ends with a prayer, ***"Remember me, O my God, for good."*** Nehemiah is an example in prayer, and that is certainly something we need more of today.

**Conclusion:**

As we close our thoughts on this passage, we thank God for Nehemiah. Here was a man minding his own business with a decent job in a distant land, but he was touched by the condition of Jerusalem and came back at great personal sacrifice. What a great example! We wish this book could have ended with the wall being built and everyone living happily ever after. But, that's not how life is. And in these struggles in the final chapter, we have found some lessons that apply to our situation here in Madison, nearly 2500 years later. Sin has a way of creeping up on us, but we must handle it decisively. Even if we have sinned in the past, it is never too late to turn around. And no matter what happens, we are to face each situation with prayer. In other words, we need to stay vigilant. We need to be alert, we need to be attentive over a long period of time. This is so much more important than staying awake during a movie! This is critical to the future of this congregation.

As we close, we would like to remind everyone here this morning that we have a way of being right with God – no matter what we have done in the past. In response to what God has done for us, we turn away from sin, we confess our belief in Jesus as God's Son, and then we allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water so that our sins will be forgiven. If you would like to talk about it, let us know, but if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...



To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)