

## **Sermon Outline**

### **“Re-Reform”**

**Nehemiah series, part 10 – Nehemiah 13 – Joshua Harris – April 17, 2011**

#### **Introduction**

The events of chapter 13 took place many years after the events of previous chapters. After being governor for 12 years, Nehemiah returned to the Persian capitol of Susa for an undefined period of time—scholars guess anywhere from 8-13 years. So chapter 13 describes events that took place when Nehemiah returned and had to *re-reform* the city.

#### **An Experience of Renewal Doesn't Mean Our Work Is Over**

1. Chapters 8-12 of Nehemiah record a mighty revival. As the Law was read, God came down in power and the people wept. They confessed their sins and made a solemn promise to obey God's law. Yet, less than 20 years later, the effects of this spiritual revival are a distant memory.
2. There are two opposite and equally mistaken extremes we can adopt when we think of revival.
  - a. One extreme is to ignore revival completely and to fail to ask for and seek God's special work in our midst.
  - b. The other extreme is to place unwarranted hope in revival: if God sends revival, everything in the church will be set right and we'll face no more problems.
3. Nehemiah's story corrects both of these extremes. It challenges us to pray for, to seek and even to long for God's reviving work in our midst. But it also includes a painfully honest record of how quickly the effects of revival can dissipate.
4. Revival isn't the finish line of the church. Until Jesus returns, we must be prepared to persevere through many toils and snares. We should ask God for revival *and* expect setbacks from indwelling sin and living in a fallen world. Here's the bottom line: we're not in the new earth yet.

#### **The Pull of the World To Compromise Never Lets Up**

1. Upon his return, Nehemiah discovered numerous transgressions of God's Law: 1) the priest defiled the temple by renting a room to his rich relative Tobiah; 2) the people were not tithing, and therefore the priests were not teaching God's Word; 3) the people stopped honoring the Sabbath; and 4) some were intermarrying with pagan cultures for financial gain.

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2. The compromise that Nehemiah described didn't take place overnight. This slide into blatant disobedience took years. Small compromise added to small compromise. The tug of the pagan cultures around them slowly pulled them away from faithfulness to God.
3. The same pull is present in our lives. The fallen world around us, the world system that stands in opposition to God is constantly seeking to *conform* us to its ways and its values and to fit us into its mold.
4. That's why the renewal of our minds by the word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ has to be *just as constant*. The Apostle Paul exhorts us in Romans 12:2: "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...*" Here's the reality for all of us: if we're not actively pushing against the spirit of our age, we're not standing still. We're being pushed away from biblical faithfulness. We never drift into godliness. We always drift away.

## There Is a Place for Outrage Over Sin

1. At the presence of sin, Nehemiah was angry. Acting in his civic role as governor of Judah, he enforced obedience to God's Law with force (see vv. 8 and 25).
2. Although our culture and legal system are very different from Nehemiah's, Nehemiah's example is instructive: he took God seriously. He saw God's laws being flaunted and disobeyed, and he didn't turn a blind eye. His love for the glory of God meant that he cared deeply. He was filled with a righteous anger.
3. There's a place for anger over sin and a place for speaking out against compromise. There's a place for loving, humble confrontation—not a self-righteous anger—but seeing God in his holiness and seeing sin for what it is: something that destroys lives.

*"The assumption, so common today, that niceness is the essence of goodness needs to be exploded. Nehemiah should not be criticized for thinking that there are more important things in life than being nice ... And if Nehemiah upsets us by seeming to be a judgmental egoist, we should remember that he believed in the absolutes of divine revelation and the reality of God's judgments with a robustness that few nowadays match. Belief in absolutes is out of fashion in the West; relativism and pluralism have become 'politically correct' pollutions of the cultural air we breathe, and any affirmation of what purports to be universal truth is thought of as bad manners, if not worse ... So if we find in ourselves the feeling that Nehemiah was judgmental, we need to check to ensure that we are not simply reflecting the prejudices of the corrupt and corrupting culture of which we are part."*

—J.I. Packer

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4. We should avoid self-righteousness but not act as if righteousness doesn't matter. Sometimes the most loving, caring thing we can do is to challenge a friend by asking a humble question. We need to be people who hate sin and compromise in our own lives and who lovingly and appropriately stand against compromise in the lives of others.

## **The Highest Goal of Our Labor Is To Be Remembered by God**

1. Nehemiah is probably in his sixties when he returned to Jerusalem. All the effort to make God's people distinct and holy seemed wasted. To make things worse, he has to be the bad guy by challenging them out of their compromise and enforcing God's law.
2. It would have been easy for him to give up. But he didn't. He persevered and pressed forward. His prayers in verses 14, 22, 31 tell us why: *"Remember me, O my God ... Remember this ... Remember me, O my God, for good."*
3. Nehemiah wasn't living for the approval of man. He wasn't even living for success in his efforts. Instead he looked to God and said, "Lord, my greatest hope is that you would remember."
4. This final, discouraging chapter of Nehemiah serves to remind us that God's people need something more than good leadership or the strict enforcement of the law. God's people need a Savior who will once and for all rescue them from their sin, a Savior who will transform them from the inside out, a Savior who by his sacrifice of his own life on the cross, would reconcile man to God, and a Savior who would give them new hearts to love and obey his word. Nehemiah points us forward to Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection enable genuine salvation and lasting reformation and revival.

## **Fellowship Starters**

1. Take time to read Nehemiah 13 as a care group.
2. In regards to revival, how does Nehemiah's story rightly adjust extremes we can adopt? Why is this a helpful correction?
3. Where are you tempted to "conform" to the world's ways or values? What steps can you take to renew your mind and heart (see Romans 12:1-2)?
4. Josh shared that sometimes, the most loving thing we can do for a fellow believer wandering toward or ensnared in sin is to bring loving correction. How is loving correction a means of grace to those who receive it? How well do you give or receive correction? Why is it a lack of love, at times, to ignore sin and compromise?

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5. In the face of what seemed like wasted efforts, why was Nehemiah able to persevere and press forward?
6. How can living for others' approval or for success in our efforts tempt us to place our hope and identity in the wrong things? How does remembering our identity in Christ enable us to "run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1)?
7. How does this closing chapter of Nehemiah point us forward to Christ?