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Nehemiah's Final Reforms

Nehemiah 13: 1-31

Nehemiah's final reforms DIG: What happened soon after Nehemiah was no longer governor of Jerusalem? What five reforms did Nehemiah make upon his return from Babylon for which he wanted ADONAI to "remember" him? Why did Nehemiah react against Tobiah the way he did? What made it necessary for Nehemiah to rectify the neglect of God's House? What made Sabbath reform necessary? How does common use of sacred things profane God's name and thus stir up His wrath? Some twenty-five years earlier, Ezra had dealt with the same problem of intermarriage with foreigners (see), but quite differently than Nehemiah did here. How are they different and why? What made marrying foreign women so evil? What example of this did Nehemiah make of Solomon and Joiada's son?

REFLECT: Which of the reforms addressed by Nehemiah needs attention in your society? Which has contributed more to your people drifting away from God? What would it mean for you to "clean house" at work? At home? At your place of worship? In your heart? Have you ever acted like Eliashib or Tobiah and taken advantage of your privileged position? If so, what caused you to change? Have you changed? What is the most important thing you learned from this study of the life of Nehemiah? How can you help others by what you have learned? What life-changing application are you making? What life application would you like ADONAI to favorably "remember?"

433-432 BC During the ministry of Nehemiah (to see link click [Bt](#) - The Third Return).

Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah Memoirs (see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: [The Nehemiah Memoirs](#)).

General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, once said to a group of new officers, "I want you young men always to bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire

to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed.” After **twelve years** of as **governor (Nehemiah 5:14)**, **Nehemiah** returned to Susa, the capital of Persia for about a year (**Nehemiah 13:6**), only to return and find the fires of devotion had gone out in **Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13:7)**. When **he** returned to **the City of David**, **he** discovered that the situation had deteriorated dramatically. **Nehemiah** immediately began to act decisively to change the situation.²⁹⁷

What Nehemiah found out on his return from Susa: In those days, Nehemiah read the scroll of Moses aloud in the hearing of the people. And not coincidentally, **the command was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should enter into the Assembly of God forever. And when they heard the Torah, the leaders of the community did what it commanded, and separated from Isra’el all of the mixed multitude (Nehemiah 13:1 and 3).** Why did **Nehemiah** read those specific scriptures about **the Ammonites and the Moabites**?

Ammon and **Mo’ab** were born from the incestuous union of Lot and two of his daughters (see the commentary on **Genesis, to see link click Fb - Let’s Get Our Father to Drink Wine and then Lie with Him**), and their descendants were the avowed enemies of **the Jews**. Somehow this **mixed multitude** had infiltrated **the people of Isra’el** in spite of previous purgings (**Nehemiah 9:2** and **10:28**). It was this **mixed multitude** that gave Moshe so much trouble (**Exodus 12:38; Numbers 11:4-6**), and **it** gives the Church trouble today. **The mixed multitude** is composed of unsaved people who want to belong to the fellowship of **God’s people** without trusting **the LORD** or submitting to **His** will. **They** want the blessings, but not the obligations, and **their** appetite is still for the things of this world as seen in the book of **Jude**.

For they did not meet Bnei-Yisrael with bread and water, but instead, about a thousand years earlier, hired the false prophet Balaam to curse them (Nehemiah 13:2). However, each time Balaam tried to curse Isra’el, our God turned the curse into a blessing (Numbers Chapters 22-24). Finally, **Balaam** hit upon a scheme to defeat **Isra’el**. **He** encouraged **the Moabites** to be “neighborly” and invite **the Jews** to share in **their** religious feasts, which involved immorality and idolatry (**Numbers 25**). **Balaam** knew that human nature would respond to the opportunity for sin, and **the Jews** would fall away from **ADONAI**. As a result of **their** sin, **Isra’el** was disciplined by **Ha’Shem** and **24,000 people died**.²⁹⁸



When **Nehemiah** returned to Persia to give a report to **King Artakh'shasta** in **433 BC**, things quickly deteriorated. Twenty-five years after **Ezra's** reforms (see **BI - Ezra's Reforms**) in 458 BC, **Nehemiah** launched another series of reforms. But after only a year **the Jews** fell into the trap of mixed marriages. It should not be a shock to us that this should happen. The same thing happened after a strong leader like **Ezra** had departed. It happened again after **Josiah** was killed (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Ai - Josiah Ruled for 31 Years from 640 to 609 BC**). Neither **Nehemiah**, nor **Ezra**, nor **Josiah** failed. **They** had each faithfully delivered **God's** messages. **The people** who disobeyed were **the ones** who had failed.

Not only were some of the **Jews** married to **Ammonites** or **Moabites**, but an **Ammonite** was actually living in **the Temple!** **Prior to Nehemiah's return** from Susa in **432 BC**, **Eliashib the high priest** had let **Tobiah the Ammonite** use one of **the storerooms** for **offerings in the House of God**. **He** had appeared as one of a trinity of evil plotters and schemers in **Nehemiah Chapters 2 and 4**. Together with **Sanballat** and **Geshem**, **Tobiah** had sought to prevent **the Israelites** from rebuilding **the walls** of **Yerushalayim**. **Eliashib** was said to be **related to Tobiah (Nehemiah 13:4)**, probably by marriage. Nevertheless, it was a classic case of compromise with the enemy of **God**. **Tobiah** had managed to acquire **a large chamber previously used to store the offerings, frankincense, and the Temple vessels, and also the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, along with the offerings for the cohanim (Nehemiah 13:4-5)**. **He** had usurped a room set apart for holy use for **his** own personal self-aggrandizement. It was, in **Nehemiah's** eyes, at best, a flagrant abuse of personal privilege; and at worse, a blasphemous disregard for the holiness of **ADONAI Himself**.²⁹⁹

When **Nehemiah** was given permission by the king to return, **he discovered the evil that Eliashib had done by preparing a chamber for Tobiah in the courts of the House of God. I was so angry that I threw all of Tobiah's**

household goods outside of the storeroom and commanded the storerooms to be cleansed. Certain things cannot be tolerated in **the House of God** at any time, and **Tobiah's** actions (let alone **Eliashib's** involvement in them) were a serious case of **defilement**, one that required **the storeroom** and its adjoining **rooms** to be **purified**. **Nehemiah** wasted no time in throwing him out and rededicating **the storerooms**. **Then, at my order, they cleansed the rooms; and I restored the utensils of the House of God, the grain offerings and the frankincense (Nehemiah 13:7b-9 CJB).** Like our **Lord, Nehemiah** had to **cleanse the Temple**, and it appeared that **he** had to do it alone.

The lesson here is that there is only one way to coast . . . downhill. Decline comes often swiftly. Without a firm moral plumb line and spiritual leadership, we are prone to drift away from our moorings. **We must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away (Hebrews 2:1).** We should ask ourselves: how firmly would I hold my convictions if those on whose leadership I depend were suddenly taken away? It is **Nehemiah's** response, however, that catches us by surprise - the swiftness of it, the violence of it. And we cannot help but think of the reaction of **Yeshua** when encountering the worldly sounds of **the money-changers in the Temple** compound (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Bs - Jesus' First Cleansing of the Temple at the Passover**). Do you ever feel a righteous **anger** when **God's** holiness is abused? What is your response when worldliness rears its ugly head in your place of worship? There are times when **anger** is not only an understandable response, but the right response (**Ephesians 4:26**).³⁰⁰

Financial support for the Temple had declined: **Nehemiah's** response to **Tobiah** was only the start of a series of actions performed by an irate **governor, angry** at the regress of reform that had taken place over the year of **his** absence. It appears that financial support for **the Temple** and its administration had declined during **Nehemiah's** absence. **I also learned that the portions for the Levites had not been provided.** Perhaps **Nehemiah** learned of this neglect as **he** was restoring **the storerooms** to **their** proper function. But **he** didn't rebuke **the Levites and singers who** abandoned **their posts** and **had gone back to their own fields.** **They** were not receiving **their** tithes, and no one could blame **them** for going home to take care of **their** families. **Nehemiah** laid the blame where it belonged. **So I rebuked the leaders and** asked: **Why has the House of God been forsaken? The Levites and singers** were probably discouraged seeing the hypocrisy of **Eliashib the cohen gadol** allowing **their** former enemy **Tobiah**

taking up residence in **the Temple**. **I assembled them and stationed them at their posts in the Temple (Nehemiah 13:10-11)**. Part of **Nehemiah's** greatness as a leader was **his** ability to apportion blame where it belonged and to engage in action to restore order by stationing reliable men in leadership positions.³⁰¹

Then all the lay members of Judah brought the tithe of grain, new wine and oil to the storehouses. Then **Nehemiah** appointed four men: **Shelemiah** the cohen, **Zadok** the scribe, and **Pedaiah** from the Levites in charge over the storehouses, and made **Hanan** son of **Zaccur** son of **Mattaniah** their assistant, because these men were considered faithful. They were responsible for distributing the tithe to their brothers. As a man of prayer, **Nehemiah** committed to **ADONAI** what **he** had so faithfully done. **Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loving kindness** (Hebrew: *chesed*, see the commentary on **Ruth Af - The Concept of Chesed**) **that I have done for the House of my God and for overseeing it (Nehemiah 13:12-14)**. This is the ninth of twelve **prayers** recorded in **Nehemiah (9:5ff, 1:5-11, 2:4, 4:4, 4:9, 5:19, 6:9, 6:14, here, 13:22, 13:29, and 13:31)**. **Nehemiah** is a good example of someone who personified *faithfulness, kindness, goodness, mercy, love and compassion*, but primarily *loyalty* to a covenant.

The Sabbath had been desecrated: Dislike of **the Sabbath** was nothing new in the life of **Isra'el**. Three hundred years earlier, the prophet **Amos** had accused **Isra'el** of resisting shutting down of business on **Shabbat (Amos 8:5)**. One hundred fifty years earlier, the prophet **Jeremiah** had described beasts of burden carrying loads in and out of **the City** on **the Sabbath** (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Ct - The Sabbath and National Survival**). This bustling scene revealed how rapidly the trickle, which must have begun in **Nehemiah's** absence of only a year had become a flood.

In those days, I saw in Judah, in the country towns outside of the City, some people treading wine presses on the Shabbat, some bringing and loading heaps of grain on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and various other burdens, bringing them into Jerusalem on the Shabbat day. So I warned them about selling food on that day. Men from Tyre who lived there were bringing fish and all kinds of merchandise and were selling it on the Yom Shabbat to the children of Judah, even in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13:15-16). The sin was being aggravated by the Sabbath being desecrated in the Holy City.

So I complained to the nobles of Judah **who bore the responsibility**, and asked them, “What is this evil thing that you are doing? You are profaning Yom Shabbat! Didn’t your ancestors do exactly the same causing our God to bring all this evil (**exile and foreign domination**) upon us and upon this city (Isaiah 63:13; Jeremiah 17:21ff; Ezeke’el 20:16)? So now you are bringing even more wrath upon Isra’el by profaning Yom Shabbat” (Nehemiah 13:17-18).

Again, **Nehemiah** took definite action. **When evening darkness began to fall on the gates of Jerusalem** on Friday before Yom Shabbat, I commanded the doors to be shut. I further commanded that they should not be opened till after Yom Shabbat. I appointed some of my attendants over the gates so that no burden could enter during Shabbat (Nehemiah 13:19).

Some, seemingly agreed by not selling on **Shabbat**, worked nonetheless by spending the night outside **the wall** so **they** could gain an advantage in the market the following day. But **Nehemiah** would have none of it. **Once or twice the traders and those selling all kinds of merchandise camped outside Jerusalem. But I warned them and said to them, “Why are you camping next to the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.”** **Being the governor of the City, Nehemiah had the authority to institute such regulations.** From that time they no longer came on the Shabbat (Nehemiah 13:20-21).

Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves, and to come and guard the gates in order to sanctify Yom Shabbat. **Apparently Nehemiah’s attendants (verse 19) who were ordered to keep watch at the gates were replaced or reinforced by Levites, and to impress upon them that their duty was holy, since it was for the purpose of keeping the Sabbath holy, they were ordered to make themselves ritually clean when they came on guard.** **Nehemiah** prayed: **Remember this also on my behalf, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of your lovingkindness (Neh 13:22).** This is the tenth of twelve **prayers** recorded in **Nehemiah (9:5ff, 1:5-11, 2:4, 4:4, 4:9, 5:19, 6:9, 6:14, 13:14, here, 13:29, and 13:31).**

The Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, is not a “Christian Sabbath,” because **Shabbat** is the seventh day of the week and belonged specifically to **the Jews**. Therefore, the commandments governing **the Jewish Sabbath** do not apply to **the Lord’s Day**. Sunday commemorates the resurrection of **Yeshua Messiah** from the

dead. Both days glorify **YHVH**.³⁰²

It is interesting to compare and contrast **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** here. In some ways, both kinds of temperaments are used by **ADONAI**, and in the end, a perfect balance is to be found in **Yeshua Messiah**. In the end, neither **Ezra** nor **Nehemiah** was capable of transforming **Isra'el**; an even greater leader was needed to do that. And as a point of comparison, in a very real sense the book of **Ezra-Nehemiah** leaves us with a sense of “unfinished business” about what had been accomplished. Before the exile, **Isaiah** had seen a far more glorious future (see the commentary on [Isaiah Jt - Isra'el in the Messianic Kingdom](#)). As the book of **Ezra-Nehemiah** closes, there is a perceptible ache for ultimate and complete fulfillment – one that was inaugurated in by the birth of **Jesus Christ**.³⁰³

Mixed marriages continued to be a problem: By the time **Nehemiah** returned to **Jerusalem**, it had become evident that a serious problem was present in **Isra'el's** marriage policy. The separation policy invoked many years earlier (**Nehemiah 13:3**) had obviously failed. **In those days, perhaps on a journey of inspection (verse 15), I also saw some Jews who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.** Worse yet, **half of their children spoke the dialect of Ashdod or the language of other people, but none of them understood Hebrew, the language of Judah (Nehemiah 13:23-24).** **The sight of the children who were unable to speak or understand Hebrew drove Nehemiah into a rage. So I rebuked them. I cursed them, beat some of their men and pulled their beards.** This is equivalent to the term “pulling the hair out by the roots.” It was sometimes self-inflicted suffering as a token or mourning (see **Ezra 9:3**), sometimes it was an act of cruel persecution (see **Isaiah 50:6**), and sometimes as a punishment as represented here in the text. It is said that the Athenians punished adulterers by tearing the hair from their scalps and then covering the head with hot ashes.³⁰⁴

In an earlier account, **Ezra** described in vivid detail how a spiritually broken **people** gathered on a rainy day in **Jerusalem** to confess **their** sin of intermarriage with unbelievers. For three months **Ezra** examined individual cases, resulting in about a hundred cases – including **priests** and **Levites** – of intermarriage with pagan **wives**. There are those who say that **Nehemiah's** attacks on mixed marriages imply that if **Ezra's** reforms had been successful, **Nehemiah** shouldn't have had to revisit them. However, **Nehemiah** was dealing with isolated cases. The main problem had been adequately taken care of under **Ezra's** reform, but **Nehemiah**

seemed to be responsible for putting a period to the principle of adhering to **God's** Word to the problem of mixed marriages.³⁰⁵ **I made them swear by God**, saying: **You shall not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons - or for yourselves. Didn't Solomon king of Isra'el sin about these things** (see the commentary on **the Life of Solomon Bx - Solomon's Wives**)? **Yet among many nations there was never any king like him. Yes, he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Isra'el. Nevertheless, the foreign women caused even him to sin. Must we then hear about you doing all this great evil, thereby being unfaithful with our God by marrying foreign women (Nehemiah 13:25-27)?**

The matter was intensified by the fact that certain **priests** were guilty of the same offense. **Now one of the sons of Joiada, son of Eliashib the cohen gadol, was son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, the enemy of the Jews** (see). **So I drove him from me. That the grandson of the High Priest was tainted by the evil justified the drastic action against him. Josephus connects this incident with the final separation of the Samaritans and their erection of a temple on Mount Gerizim (Antiquities XI. viii. I).**

Nehemiah lived on the frontier between two worlds: life as **ADONAI** intended it to be and life as **the Righteous of the TaNaKh** had chosen to make it. Throughout **his** life, **Nehemiah** was forced to choose between self and **YHVH**, sin and holiness, compromise and resolute determination to do what **Ha'Shem** asked of **him**. **He** has emerged as a hero, a larger-than-life individual with strength of character and an occasional wart. **He** has proved **himself** to be a leader of men, gifted with an extraordinary resourcefulness and determination to attempt great things for **the LORD**. He has also shown himself capable of compassion and indignation. As someone intent on promoting **God's** glory in everything, **he** can appear overbearing and intolerant. We notice **his** imprecatory prayers, literally throwing **his** weight about, bullying, persuading, and threatening. But in an age that mistrusts such masculine qualities, **Nehemiah** is thrown into a bad light. Though **the Chronicler** views **him** as an exemplary character, we are not obligated to defend **his** every action any more than we would the actions of David or Solomon or even Paul. Some wonder whether the latter's refusal to take John **Mark** on a **Second Missionary Journey** (see the commentary on **Acts Bv - Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas**) after the young disciple had left the apostle on the **First Missionary Journey** and gone home was too harsh and uncharitable. **Nehemiah**, like almost all other biblical characters, has feet of clay. Only **Yeshua** is

sinless.³⁰⁶

Nehemiah's final prayer: Then **Nehemiah** prayed: **O my God, please remember them for the defilement of the priesthood as well as the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites (Nehemiah 13:28-29).** This is the eleventh of twelve **prayers** recorded in **Nehemiah (9:5ff, 1:5-11, 2:4, 4:4, 4:9, 5:19, 6:9, 6:14, 13:14, 13:22, here, and 13:31).** His actions were godly, done in grateful response to **the LORD's loving kindness** (Hebrew: *chesed*) to **him** and to **the people of Isra'el.**

So I purged them from everything foreign, their pagan wives and customs that **they** had introduced, **and I assigned duties for the cohanim and the Levites, each to his own task, and for the wood offering at the appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good (Nehemiah 13:30-31).** This is the last of twelve **prayers** recorded in **Nehemiah (9:5ff, 1:5-11, 2:4, 4:4, 4:9, 5:19, 6:9, 6:14, 13:14, 13:22, 13:29, and here).** **Nehemiah** started with **a prayer (Ezra 1:5-11)** and ends with this **prayer.** These verses serve as a short conclusion to the book. **Nehemiah** is known for rebuilding **the walls of Jerusalem.** However, **he** finished **his** report to the king of Persia with more emphasis on the establishment and purification of a community worshipping **ADONAI. Nehemiah** was persistent in seeking that goal.³⁰⁷

After Nehemiah's final reforms, we have 400 years of silence (The Intertestamental Period), until we read the words of Matthew: A record of the genealogy of Yeshua Messiah the son of David, the Son of Abraham (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ [Ai](#) - The Genealogies of Joseph and Mary**).