

Nehemiah 11-13 - Nehemiah Cleans House

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Nehemiah chapter 11. We learned in an earlier chapter, that Nehemiah was concerned by the fact that there weren't that many people living in the city of Jerusalem. He was concerned that the city couldn't be defended if it came under attack or something like that.

As we get into chapter 11, we see how they decided to resolve the problem. Look at verse 1. It says, *“Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. (that's the leaders, but it says) And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns.” (ESV)*

Stop there for just a moment. Let me tell you what's going on. First of all, it says that the leaders had chosen to go ahead and live in Jerusalem, but they decided that among the people who were living outside of the city, they were going to buy lottery, choose one out of every ten to actually go and live in Jerusalem.

You might think, well, why wouldn't people want to live in Jerusalem? Well, cities were the places that enemies attacked. If you lived in the country, you would be largely ignored if an enemy came into the land and started trying to attack. You'd have a much better chance of getting away, frankly, if you lived on your farm, out in the middle of nowhere. Or in a small town, perhaps around Jerusalem that really wasn't significant from any sort of a military or political standpoint.

Living in the city carried a risk and so they decided that the really only fair way of populating Jerusalem was to use a lottery system. And if your number came up, you had to move to the city. An interesting solution you have to admit, but that's what they decided to do.

And you'll notice in verse 2 that we're told, *“And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.”* And that was mostly the leaders, but apparently some other people stood up and said, you know what? I don't care if my number comes up or not, I'll go. And the people were like, hey, good job, because again, it was a risk.

Verse 3 says, *“These are the chiefs of the province who lived in Jerusalem; but in the towns of Judah everyone lived on his property in their towns: Israel, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants, and the descendants of Solomon’s servants.”*⁴ And in Jerusalem lived certain of the sons of Judah and of the sons of Benjamin.” And then you’ll notice it says, *“Of the sons of Judah: ...”* It lists them there in the rest of this verse on down through verse 5.

Skip down to verse 6 with me. *“All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 valiant men.”*⁷ And these are the sons of Benjamin: ...” and then it lists them there. Jump down to verse 8, *“and his brothers, men of valor, 928.”*⁹ Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer; and Judah the son of Hassenuah was second over the city.”

And then it says in verse 10, *“Of the priests: ...”* And it lists them there. Skip down to verse 12. *“and their brothers who did the work of the house, (it lists them as) 822 (men); and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, ...”* Skip down to verse 13, *“and his brothers, heads of fathers’ houses, (and then it lists them there) 242; ...”*

And then this numbering of the families in the houses continues through verse 19. And it ends with a listing and the numbering of the gatekeeper. You see that there are, sons of, sons of, and the brothers of, and the Levites, and on and on.

By the way, you might notice in verse 18, it says that, *“All the Levites in the holy city were 284.”* Of course they were in charge of the temple precincts and all the duties of the temple. Verse 19 tells you about the gatekeepers, who they were, and they numbered 172.

Picking it up then in verse 20, it says, *“And the rest of Israel, and of the priests and the Levites, were in all the towns of Judah, every one in his inheritance.”*²¹ *But the temple servants lived on Ophel; and Ziha and Gishpa were over the temple servants.*

²² *The overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, son of Hashabiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Mica, of the sons of Asaph, the singers, over the work of the house of God.*²³ *For there was a command from the king concerning them, and a fixed provision for the singers, as every day required.”*

Apparently, even the Persian king had made an allowance to support these workers in the temple and these singers in the temple out of the local tax revenues.

Verse 24 says, “*And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the son of Judah, was at the king's side in all matters concerning the people.*”²⁵ *And as for the villages, with their fields, some of the people of Judah lived in*” And it goes on and lists some of the villages of Judah.

Like I said, lists, right? Some of you people you have sticky notes all over the place and this is Nehemiah. He's listing all these things for posterity.

Skip down to verse 31. It says, “*The people of Benjamin also lived from Geba onward,...*” And then he goes on to mention by name the villages and places where the people of Benjamin lived.

Skip down to verse 36. “*And certain divisions of the Levites in Judah were assigned to Benjamin.*”

Chapter 12. We're really going to deal with a whole lot of more lists here in chapter 12, so we'll get through this very quickly. This time what he's going to do is he's going to list the Levitical priests from the very first Jewish returnees after the exile up until the present day. And the point of doing this, maybe you're thinking to yourself, what in the world is this all about? Why is this even necessary to go through and list all these things?

Well, it was important on several fronts, but not the least of which was to show God's faithfulness. What Nehemiah is doing by listing the priests particularly, is showing, that there has always been a function of the priesthood from the time of the returnees from the exile up until the present day.

God has supernaturally ministered through the priests and so forth. He lists them here and says. “*These are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, ...*” We haven't heard that name practically since beginning in the Book of Ezra and it begins to list them all there.

And then down in verse 8, it begins listing the Levites, and on, and on. And there are a lot of them. And it talks about in verse 22 that, “*In the days of Eliashib, Joiada, ...*” And on and on and on. “*...the Levites were recorded as heads of fathers' houses; so too were the priests in the reign of Darius the Persian.*” Which is speaking of Darius the king of Persia.

Verse 23, “*As for the sons of Levi, their heads of fathers' houses were written in the Book of the Chronicles until the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib.*”²⁴ *And the chiefs of the Levites:...*” It lists them there. “*...with their brothers who stood opposite them, to praise and to give thanks, according to the commandment of*

David the man of God, watch by watch.” You can see that they are restoring the Davidic worship in Jerusalem and that was a big deal for them.

Verse 25 and 26 continues on with naming these individuals, those who *“...were gatekeepers, standing guard at the storehouses.”* Verse 26, *“These were in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and of Ezra, the priest and scribe.”* Now, that was pretty quick.

Now, beginning here at verse 27, we're going to read about the dedication of the finished wall around the city of Jerusalem because the temple had been finished now for quite some time. Now the wall is all finished and of course there needs to be a dedication.

And we read about that beginning in verse 27, *“And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.*

²⁸ And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; ²⁹ also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem.”

It's basically just saying from all these places that they had begun to settle, they're now calling them back to Jerusalem for the point of the dedication process. *“³⁰ And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.*

³¹ Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks. One went to the south on the wall to the Dung Gate.” And then he goes on to list those who were of the first choir. There is just a lot of names, frankly.

Let's skip down to verse 37. *“At the Fountain Gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, to the Water Gate on the east.*

³⁸ The other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north, and I followed them with half of the people, on the wall, above the Tower of the Ovens, to the Broad Wall, ³⁹ and above the Gate of Ephraim, and by the Gate of Yeshanah, and by the Fish Gate and the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred,

to the Sheep Gate; and they came to a halt at the Gate of the Guard. ⁴⁰ So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me;

⁴¹ and the priests... (and it lists them there:) Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; (lists more of them there:) ⁴² and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader. ⁴³ And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.”

Wouldn't that have been something to see? Can you imagine? Two great choirs, that they started in different positions on the wall who came singing, playing trumpets, and their other instruments around the city to a place where they met. And then apparently assembled within the temple and began to worship the Lord and just praise God for His goodness.

What an amazing thing. I mean, we can only come so far with this, I suppose, in our mind's eye and our imaginations being the limitation there. But to just...oh, it just sounds like an amazing time.

And then the chapter concludes with Nehemiah kind of explaining how the duties and responsibilities of the Levites were reestablished along with some of the other duties as defined again during the Davidic kingdom or the kingdom of David.

And he simply says, *“⁴⁴ On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the Law for the priests and for the Levites according to the fields of the towns, for Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered. ⁴⁵ And they performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon.*

⁴⁶ For long ago in the days of David and Asaph there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. ⁴⁷ And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers; and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron.”

Which of course are the high priests. And again, the purpose of this section is to recall that the work of the priests and the Levites had been put in place since ancient times and since the Jews first returned, these duties had continually been performed.

Now we come to the final chapter of Nehemiah. It says, *“On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people.”*

Now, *“On that day,”* don't think that necessarily means on the very day that we've been talking about. Because I believe that there was probably a fairly lengthy break between the dedication that we've just read about in the previous chapter and now what you're hearing.

Because we're going to see here in a moment how Nehemiah says he went back to the Persian kingdom for a period of time and then returned. And how long he stayed, we don't know. But it would take 55 days essentially to make the journey from Jerusalem back to the Persian citadel. Then it would take another 55 days of course to return so there you go. There's a 110 days gone. How many days Nehemiah stayed, we don't know, he's been gone a while.

The thing that must have been discouraging is that while he was gone, however long it was, there was a return to the ways of the people, contrary to the Word of God. And that's very difficult and very frustrating for a leader.

Nehemiah gets back to Jerusalem and finds out that all the things the people promised, they've gone back on, at least to some degree. He tells about how he dealt with it here.

“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 enter the assembly of God, ² for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing.”

And so we know that they are reading from what is to us, Deuteronomy chapter 23, where Moses is recalling to the people of Israel... And Deuteronomy is just Moses' final sermon before he basically died. He basically recounted the events and everything the Lord told him to the people. That is the Book of Deuteronomy. It's really one long sermon by Moses.

And he's telling them, he's reminding them remember that the Moabites rather than meeting us with any kind of a friendly sort of a stance when we pass

through, they hired Balaam to put a curse on us. And for that reason, no Moabite and no Ammonite was to be included in the assembly of Israel.

Verse 3 says, *“As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.”* Now, this wasn't a racist thing to do. This wasn't, them being racist for the sake of being racist. What they're doing is serving trying to protect the Jewish community from the influence of these very destructive pagan religions are taken up by these people.

Now, he begins to tell us some other things that were going on. He says, *“⁴ Now before this, Eliashib (and that's) the priest, (right) who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah,”* Do you guys remember Tobiah? He was a scoundrel and he was very much opposed to the building of the wall, and tried very strongly to stop the process, okay?

Now it says, *“...Eliashib the priest, (okay) who was appointed over the chambers...”* Look what it goes on to say in verse 5, he *“prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.”* Do you see what's going on?

This priest takes this chamber of the temple and gives it to this Tobiah who is an enemy. And you think, why in the world would he do that? Well, we'll learn more as we go.

But look what he says here in verse 6. *“While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king (we don't know how much time that was)⁷ and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.”*

When Nehemiah returned, he found that the priest had been actually creating a place in the temple where this guy Tobiah was apparently living because it says in verse 8. *“And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber.”*

As soon as he got there, he realized what was going on, and Nehemiah, I'm assuming he probably got some help, but they just chucked this furniture. Just out of this place. Get this out of here.

He says, *“⁹ Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.”* Nehemiah restored the area for its proper use.

He says in verse 10, *“I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field.”* Why did they go to their fields? They weren't being taken care of.

It was the commandment of God of the people, toward the people of Israel, to give tithes and offerings into the storehouse of Israel to take care of the needs of the Levites. And the high priestly family who were also Levites, but were specifically from the house of Aaron, the brother of Moses.

You do understand that. Only the descendants of Aaron's family, only the descendants of Aaron could be high priests. Aaron himself was a Levite of the house of Levi but only his family could be high priests. If you weren't of Aaron's household, which we call the Aaronic priesthood, then you were just considered a Levite and you couldn't be a high priest, but you were in charge of the temple area, the temple precinct.

Well, they did it full time, this is what they did with their lives. They served full time so God made a way for their needs to be taken care of by the people through their tithes and offerings, you see. And interesting that we just covered this in our study in 1 Corinthians, how this has made its way into the New Testament related to those who work full time in the ministry.

Nehemiah gets back and finds out they haven't been doing it, and because they haven't been taking care of the Levites, the Levites said, well, we can't stay here, we can't feed our families. They went back to their fields to begin to work the fields so they could make an income and have food. And so Nehemiah... Now this is something that people had promised that they would take care of.

He says in verse 11, *“So I confronted the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” And I gathered them together and set them in their stations.¹² Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.¹³ And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers.”* Got to put people in charge.

And then he says, *“¹⁴ 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 his service.”*

He's just saying Lord remember, remember what I did. Remember how I took care of this in keeping with your law Lord, don't forget. And that's a neat prayer, but I think it's completely unnecessary from the standpoint that I don't believe God ever forgets, right.

Verse 15, the next problem. *“In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. ¹⁶ Tyrians (which would be merchants from the region of Tyre, okay? In other words, Phoenicians) also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself!”*

What's going on here? Nehemiah comes to find out that the people are themselves laboring on the Sabbath. And he says that there are other merchants from the region of Tyre who are also coming to the city on the sabbath and they're being allowed in the city to sell their wares And so, in other words the Sabbath is being treated like a business as usual sort of a day. All right.

He says, verse 17. *“Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.””*

He confronts them here and says, this is why we got into trouble in the first place, was by taking God's law and just forgetting about it, and ignoring what He had commanded for us in His Word.

Now, at a point like this, there are some Christians who will read a passage like this and say, well, we're not doing any better. God's probably mad at us too because we're not keeping the Sabbath either.

And believe me, there's a lot of Christians who struggle with that. There are whole denominations built on it; on the idea of keeping the Sabbath. And the belief among those groups and denominations is that you as a Christian, we as Christians are commanded by God in the scripture to keep the Sabbath. So what

about it? Well, the fact of the matter is well, there's several facts frankly to the matter.

But the first is God created the Sabbath as part of the law with Israel. It was a commandment that was given to Israel. Now, yes, some people will say, but the Sabbath predated the law, and that is true. But it was also included in the law in the covenant that God made with Israel.

That Sabbath was a beautiful picture, a pointer, if you will, of something that Jesus came beautifully to fulfill. In the Sabbath, the Sabbath was all about resting. The Jews made these huge rules and regulations out of what God simply said was, rest on the Sabbath. They came up with all these crazy regulations that they added to it.

All God said was, rest on the Sabbath. Do no regular work on the Sabbath. Make it a day of rest. We know that the Sabbath originally from God was all about rest.

We know from the Book of Hebrews that Jesus is our Sabbath rest. That what God was communicating to His people was the idea of resting and that in Christ, who came and did the work on the cross that we couldn't do.

He gave his life for the sins of the world. When we put our faith in Him, we are resting in His finished work on the cross. That means you and I keep the Sabbath every day, every single day of the week.

The Jews were to keep the Sabbath one day out of the week, on Saturday. You and I keep the Sabbath every day. How do we do it? By faith.

The Bible says in Hebrews, there is still a Sabbath rest for the people of God. (Hebrews 4:9) But it also goes on to say there in Hebrews, that those who have put their faith in Jesus have entered God's kingdom rest. (Hebrews 4:10) We've entered into the rest of God, meaning that you and I can, (pastor Paul exhales) we can rest.

We don't have to work. We don't work for our salvation, do we? We don't tell people, well, here's what you got to do to be saved. No, rather we point them to Jesus and say, He did all the work.

Now here's your job to rest in what He did. Are you resting in what Jesus did on the cross? I mean, resting, it's like, and you know what it means to rest. It means not to work.

I'm not working my way to heaven. I'm resting in what Jesus did for me. If you're doing that, you're keeping the Sabbath.

If somebody were to ask you, do you keep the Sabbath? Now they probably don't mean what we're going to say, but our answer is, yeah, I keep the Sabbath. And they might even say to you, what day? You can just come right back and say, every day. Every day of the week, I keep the Sabbath. Right?

Jesus is my Sabbath rest, and I believe that it is by grace through faith that I am saved. And this not of myself or even the keeping of a Sabbath day.

Paul writes to the Colossians and says don't let anyone judge you by what you eat, or drink, or a new moon, or a Sabbath day. (Colossians 2:16) He says these are a shadow of the things that are to come. They point to Jesus. He is the fulfillment of those Old Testament things, such is the Sabbath.

Now, in Nehemiah's day, it was still a command of God, predicated upon the Mosaic Law, and he was very distressed that these individuals were being allowed into the city, and allowing, as he says, to profane the Sabbath.

Verse 19, *“As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, ...”* This is basically when the Sabbath begins, on Thursday evening. Because, from the Jewish reckoning of time, a day ends at sundown and a new day begins. The Sabbath really begins at sunset, to you and I would be Thursday night, okay? And then goes through sunset on, I'm sorry, Friday night, and then into Saturday. I got that wrong. Friday night, sunset, starts the Sabbath, through Saturday.

He says, *“As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. (I like that) ²¹ But I warned them and said to them, “Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.””*

And he's not talking about praying for them either. He's talking about being physical. They're lodging outside the city in hopes that the gate's going to be opened up so they can get in and sell their stuff. And so he asked them, what are you doing here?

And he says, *“From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. ²² Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.”*

I just, I love those little prayers that Nehemiah tags on to the end of these stories. Lord, just remember, just remember.

Verse 23, yet another issue that Nehemiah found. *“In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, (that's the area of Philistia, where the Philistines lived, and also) Ammon, and Moab.”* Right?

Now, you'll recall in the Book of Ezra, they had to take measures to deal with the problem of intermarriage that had gone on, you'll remember, in the land. But apparently it had very little lasting effect because here we are again.

And it says, it was so bad, in verse 24, *“And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people.”*

These kids, not only were they the byproduct of these mixed marriages, but the people who married foreigners made no effort whatsoever to pass along their heritage to these children. To the point where they couldn't even speak the language of their own people, they spoke the language of their foreign parent. In this case, he talks about the language of Ashdod. Ashdod was one of the major cities of the Philistines.

He says, *“²⁵ And I confronted them (look what he says here) and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. (aren't you glad Nehemiah isn't your pastor? He says) And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.”*

²⁶ Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. ²⁷ Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?””

Notice he brings up Solomon, even Solomon. Here's the man who was the wisest man in all of the earth. The Bible says God gave him more wisdom than

any other man. And yet with all that wisdom, you'd think that Solomon would have had all the smarts he needed to make really good decisions.

I was very impressed as a teenager with Solomon. I read the Bible once in a while, but I just, I landed on Solomon. And I remember Solomon had one of those great opportunities that very few people get where God just basically said, ask what you want and I'll give it to you. That genie in a bottle sort of an experience and except no genie, no bottle. It was God saying, hey, I'll give you whatever you want.

And Solomon said, I feel so ill prepared to be King over this great nation of Yours, I need wisdom. And God was very pleased with him. He said, you could have asked for wealth or long life, but since you didn't, I'm going to give you what you asked for and I'm going to give you what you didn't ask for.

And I remember just being very impressed with Solomon. He was a very impressive man. Solomon reigned over more land in Israel than any other king. No other king reigned over as much as he did. It was a time of unprecedented peace. It was just a powerful time. The temple was built during the time of Solomon. It was just a glorious time.

And I was so impressed as a kid with Solomon until I got to that place in the scripture where it said that he was drawn away by his wives. And I'm thinking to myself, well, what did all that wisdom get him? And I remember being really let down because for a period of time I was really praying, God, just give me wisdom. Give me wisdom. Give me wisdom. And then I realized that he still fell away from the Lord and I thought, well, that's not enough. It's not enough. He was drawn away by this area of weakness.

The Bible says he held fast to his foreign wives and they led him astray. And Nehemiah brings up the example of Solomon basically to say to these guys, are you better than Solomon? He was drawn away. Do you think you're not going to be drawn away too? What have you done here?

Verse 28, “*And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest,...*” Remember Eliashib is the one who set the room aside for Tobiah, right? The scoundrel.

Now, this is , *the son of Eliashib (right?) the high priest, (it says he) was (actually) the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite.*” Who's Sanballat, do you remember? He was the, the co-conspirator along with Tobiah to try to ruin the building of the wall. These guys worked in concert to bring down every effort to

build the wall of Jerusalem. And now it says that the son of the high priest actually married into the family of this Sanballat the Horonite.

And look what Nehemiah says at the end of the verse 28. *“Therefore I chased him from me.”* You got to like this guy. I chased him out, I chased him away. This is the son of the high priest. I'm going to get rid of the guy. Boy, when there's laxity among the spiritual leaders of the land, you've got serious issues going on.

Verse 29, *“Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood (speaking of this man and his father) and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. ³⁰ Thus (he says) I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work;”*

Verse 31 *“and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits.*

Remember me, O my God, for good.”

Now, as we close out the Book of Nehemiah, I want to just recall to you again that back in Nehemiah chapter 10, the people were going through a time of revival, I guess, for lack of a better word. There was a real awakening going on among the people and they were being drawn to the Word of God. They were being drawn..., they were responding very powerfully to the Word of God. And it was an exciting time and the people made promises to God.

And they basically promised that they would not have ungodly relationships with foreigners. That was in chapter 10 verse 30.

And then they promised God that they were not going to buy and sell on the Sabbath. That was in chapter 10 verse 31.

And they promised God that they would not fail to support the Levitical priests with their tithes and offerings and so forth as God had commanded and that's recorded in chapter 10 verses 32 through 39.

And then Nehemiah goes away for a period of time and he comes back and what does he find? He finds that everything they promised, they went back on. Everything that they made these lofty promises to God about they went back on. And this is exactly what Nehemiah finds them doing now.

And this certainly brings to the forefront, once again, the fact that the law, with its rules, with its vows, with its promises, and so forth has no power whatsoever to change the condition of a human heart.

This is something that the New Testament authors argue about; Paul, the writer of the Book of Hebrews. They talk about the fact the law can't change your heart. It just, it can't. You can make the law can say, do this and you can make promises related to the law, but it's not going to make it. You can't change your heart. Can you change your behavior for maybe for a while, maybe for a short time, but it can't change the heart, you see.

The heart is the wellspring of our life. Everything issues forth from the heart. The heart has to be fundamentally changed for our lives to change. I don't know how many of you guys have made promises to God over the course of your Christian walk, but I remember doing it a few foolish times. And it's not uncommon. I think we probably all have at some particular point.

I remember one time. I've told you guys in the past that, it has been a challenge throughout my Christian walk to be a consistent person of prayer. And it's been challenging from the very beginning. And when I began to really walk with the Lord in earnestness, I recognized that prayer was very important and yet very challenging.

And I remember making a promise to God that I was going to pray for this amount of time on these days. And I did it for about 3 or 4 days and then I fell off the wagon. And I'm willing to bet you probably have a similar story of sometime in your life, maybe sometime when you did some sin, you committed some sin, you knew was wrong. You knew going into it was wrong and you did it, and then you absolutely felt horrid, and just cried out to God.

Have you ever done that? Just cried out to God from the depth of your heart and just, and were disgusted with yourself. Have you ever been just totally disgusted with yourself and just said to God, oh God, I just feel so filthy. I feel so rotten on the inside, and I'm just, I'm so tired of my sin. I'm so tired of these things that I do. I know they're wrong, and I just can't seem to stop them.

And just in this moment of just what we think is kind of this righteous indignation. Well, I'm done now with this thing. I'm finished with this area of sin in my life. And from this point forward, I will not sin and do this. And at the time, we mean it with all of our hearts. There's only one problem. That's the law. That's the law. That's not how our hearts get changed.

Our hearts can only be changed by the grace of God and the work of God's Holy Spirit in our lives, through our lives, and through His grace. That's the only way, so don't look for victory over sin by making rules, making promises, making vows.

There are churches, there are Christian churches that have moved into legalism, thinking that they were doing right, having people make promises. I'm not..., and they actually have people sign things, sign documents. I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to do this. And if you really love God and if you're devoted to the things of the Lord, you're going to sign this document today saying that you're never going to do this sort of thing. And what they're doing is they're imposing the law on people.

That's not how you live a righteous life before God. It doesn't work. I mean, the whole world knows it doesn't work. I mean, what do you hear every year around the New Year? You hear all about everybody's New Year's resolutions, and how nobody expects you to keep them, right? That's what you hear every single year. The world knows it doesn't work. When are we going to try to catch on?

Listen, you cannot bypass grace. You cannot live a righteous life in the strength of your will. It takes grace. It takes God's power and grace working through your life. Listen, if you could be saved by keeping promises, or by your devotion to Jesus, then obviously Jesus' death on the cross would have been completely unnecessary.

Well, it's the same thing with living a Christian life. If you can live the Christian life without the power of Christ, without the cross, without taking up your cross, but just through the strength of your will and the strength of your effort, then grace is ineffectual and unnecessary. But the fact of the matter is, you can't.

And I am first of all, happy that we aren't saved by making a vow or turning over a new leaf, like we used to say. And in the same way I'm I praise God that we aren't kept and that we don't walk with God by works and effort and all the things that, by gutting it out and being this devoted Christian.

Once we're saved, we are not changed into the image of Christ by hard work and dedication on of ourselves. We are changed into the image of Christ by trusting Him to do that remodeling work. People, that's so important to understand.

I know that it's difficult to say... Because people will accept that they're saved by grace through faith, but they fundamentally reject that they are now living

their life by grace through faith. That they are transformed by grace through faith. Listen, it's all faith, you guys. The Bible says from faith to faith, from first to last, it's faith. (Romans 1:17) You start with faith, you end with faith.

You put your faith in God for salvation. You put your faith in God for change. You put your faith in God for transformation. That's why Paul said in Romans, reckon yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God. (Romans 6:11)

What does it mean to reckon? To believe, believe by faith that you're dead to sin and alive to God. By faith believe that you're going to have victory over that area of sin in your life that keeps rubbing your nose in the mud. By faith, believe it. By faith begin to believe that God is able to do what you are not.

It's so important for you and I as Christians to look at those areas of sin in our lives that have dominated us, and to look right into the eyes of that area of sin and say, I can't do this, but God can.

God is able, working in me by faith as I trust in Him. God, I'm trusting in You to do this. I'm trusting in You to transform my life. I'm trusting in you to take Your Word, which is alive. Right? And active to put it into my life and change me from here to here, to here, to here.

You're the one moving me along to the very image of Christ. I can't do it myself. You can't do it yourself. Only God can do it through His grace.

There are so many Christians who are walking around trying to be Christians in and of themselves. In their own power, in their own ability, and they're miserable. And they look at other Christians, and they think, I don't think it's as hard for that person as it is for me. And we do that all the time. We compare ourselves with each other.

And we look at people, and we see the smile on their face, and we and we go, oh, they're so happy. They have such joy in their life. Why don't I have that kind of joy in my life? Why don't I have that kind of happiness in my life? And we think, oh, maybe I'm not cut out to do this. Maybe this Christian thing is for other people, but not for me.

If we could pump a little truth potion through the vents and let us all just take a good deep breath of it and just start talking, you'd be shocked to hear that just about, without fail, people will start talking about how they understand and know of their own personal failings. And they can only do this by relying on Jesus.

And they themselves, like Paul, they'll say things, I am the chief of sinners. Saved by grace through faith, I am the chief of sinners. (1 Timothy 1:15) I'm the worst, I'm the top dog when it comes to sinners, people that need Jesus, that need His forgiveness and need His grace, to change my life.

Listen, we all want to be changed by God, but that's the key right there. It's being changed by God, so how do I begin to place myself in a situation where I can be changed by God? Well, obviously you need to be in an environment, right? Where that change is going to be able to take place.

If you're still living in the midst of your own sinful life, this is where repentance comes in by the way. If you're still living in the midst of your own simple life, you're not putting yourself in a place where that transformation can even happen.

God wants to do that transformation, right? But if I share with people from time to time, if you want to grow a palm tree, I wouldn't plant it in Alaska if I were you, because that's not the environment in which that palm tree is going to grow. I mean, we can hardly even get them to grow in this part of, in our zone. You have to plant things where they're going to grow.

You want God's Word, you want that transformation to take place in your life. You have to be in the path of the Word of God. That's why fellowship and reading the Bible and prayer is so important because those are the building blocks that God, the Holy Spirit is going to use in your life, gather all up in your life, and do that work of transformation.

But that transformation, we can actually hold off that process of transformation by the Spirit, by never investing the building blocks of transformation. In other words, if you're not in the Word, you're not taking any time to spend in prayer. You're not in good Christian fellowship, but if you're fellowshiping out in the world, you're hearing the philosophies and the wisdom of the world, and you're never around the things that are good for you spiritually, you're going to be hampered in that transformation process.

In other words, the Spirit is going to be hampered. You'll be actually grieving the Holy Spirit from that work He wants to do in you, which is to form you into the image of Christ. But when you present yourselves before the Word of God, and open your heart to it, and pray for wisdom, God, I need wisdom to hear from You. I need wisdom to hear Your Word.

Humble yourself before God and spend time in prayer and spend time with in fellowship with believers who are going to encourage you and not drag you back down into the pit. Now you have yourself in a place where God can gather up those wonderful building blocks He's given to you and I, and he can do that work of transformation, but it's still His work. We just put ourselves in the right environment for growth. That's our responsibility.

Lord, I just want to be open to You, but I can't change my heart. I can't change my life. And these areas of sin in my life, these things that keep messing me, over and dragging me down, I can't change those things. I can't do it. If I could, I would, but I can't.

Now, I believe that You can. I believe You've given me everything I need for life and godliness. (2 Peter 1:3) That's what Your Word says, God, so I'm going to hold You to it. You've given me everything I need for godliness. God, I'm going to hold You to that.

Do you think God is intimidated by you holding Him to His promises? I think He delights in it, actually. I think God loves it when His children are saying to Him, God, I'm going to hold You to that. I'm standing on that promise. You made it, God, I didn't, and I'm going to stand on it. You said everything I need for godliness.

You said that no temptation would come upon me that would be too much. That You're going to give me a way out of that temptation. I'm trusting You to do that, God.

And as we trust, and as we put our hope in Him, He's the one who's going to do the work, so it won't be lists or rules or promises. It's going to be grace. God's grace.