

## **Reforms & Reminders**

### Nehemiah 12:44 – 13:31

#### **Structured for Worship**

In a continuation of the joy of dedication (12:43), the community organizes its support of the priests and Levites, rejoicing “over the priests and the Levites who ministered.” (12:44) As part of the establishment of this restored community, we see the community take steps to embed the covenantal relationship into the structure of the society and the roles for the people.

Notice that they connect what they are doing in that day to “the command of David and his son Solomon.” (12:45)

**Leadership lessons:** If you want something done, put the structure and resources in place to make it happen. The people did not stop at the point of making a commitment to worship; they put in place the people, “men were appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes,” (12:44) and the structure to continue to provide for the ministry. Today, we simply say “walking the talk.” In this case, it means not just walking (modeling), but putting a support system in place to enable faithful walking of the talk. How often have you seen good ideas and even serious commitments fail to come to fruition because the support system around it was not put in place?

Notice that there is an explicit connection between the past and the present, through the reference to David and Solomon (12:45). Implicit is the expectation for the future. When people hear how what is expected today connects to the past, they are better able to appreciate the importance of that expectation. Furthermore, stating the connection helps those that come later continue to meet those expectations in the future. (Of course, a good leader will stay in tune with the changing context to adjust expectations.)

#### **Who is welcome?**

Chapter 13 could appear to be harsh acts of unwelcome. The community decided to exclude from the assembly all those of foreign descent (13:3). This decision was based on Deut 23:3-6 which banned Ammonites and Moabites permanently (to the tenth generation) from participation in Israel's community. Both in Deuteronomy and in Nehemiah this exclusion is based on their inhospitality toward Israel in the wilderness period (“did not meet the Israelites with bread and water”) and the hiring of Balaam in a futile attempt to curse them (Numbers 22:1-24; 31:8, 16; Josh 13:22). Nehemiah had charged earlier that Tobiah and Sanballat had hired the false prophet Shemaiah against him (6:12). That attempt to undo Nehemiah by hiring someone against him continued the hostile spirit of the Ammonites (Tobiah was an Ammonite; 2:10, 19) and the Moabites. The community did not demand that men who had already married foreign wives must divorce, and this may indicate that Ezra's policy (Ezra 10:11) had been unpopular, unsuccessful, or both. Nehemiah expelled Tobiah rather than forcing him to get a divorce (13:8), and he only required the people to take an oath not to engage in mixed marriages in the future (see 13:23-27).

Tobiah was living in the temple chambers with the permission of the priest Eliashib. Eliashib's actions were highly offensive to Nehemiah (13:8), and Nehemiah promptly threw Tobiah and his household goods out of the chamber. Nehemiah also gave orders to purify the chambers (2 Chr 29:15-19) and to restore the temple vessels, the cereal offering, and the frankincense that had been formerly kept there. Nehemiah locked the gates on the Sabbath to keep the merchants from selling on the Sabbath.

Dealing with the issue of “purity” is a very sensitive topic, especially in our day. What was it that caused Nehemiah to deal with these issues so severely, even to the point of cursing, beating and pulling out their hair (13:25)? For Nehemiah, the entire culture and the meaning of this holy city, set aside and dedicated to the Lord, hung in the balance. Nehemiah saw this as an influence of evil that would undo the blessings from the Lord and result in punishment instead.

Clearly not everyone, not even among the priests, was on the same page with Nehemiah. Eliashib's actions disrupted the purity of part of the Temple where temple vessels and contributions had once been stored; even worse, it destroyed the financial system that supported the clergy. When the Levites and singers had to go out on the land to support themselves, the Temple, in Nehemiah's view, had been abandoned (13:11). Somehow things had progressed to this point of neglect; they lost sight of their reason to exist.

**Leadership lesson:** In 13:4, we read "before this" which indicates that historically Nehemiah did not wait for the community to come to a consensus before he took decisive action. The incident in 13:4-9 took place before the final separation from all those of mixed descent (13:3). There are times when a leader must take decisive action, before consensus has been reached. Nehemiah had the courage to do so. There are times when we are called to act, seemingly alone in this world, to stand up for what is right and to directly battle against the forces of evil. A wise person takes these steps with God's guidance and not just with a hot temper.

### **How will they be remembered?**

Nehemiah had the wisdom to bring everyone on board. In other words, he didn't just hop from issue to issue with a solo "take charge" attitude, but stayed engaged to support these initial moves with long-lasting solutions. He responded to the flight of the Levites by remonstrating with the lay officials (13:11; 17, 25, and 5:7) and by restoring the Levites to their appropriate posts. Then all of Judah, perhaps with the encouragement of the lay officials, brought in the tithe of grain, wine, and oil. Nehemiah attempted to give these reforms lasting effect (13:32 and 5:10) by setting up a four-person commission to handle the distribution of the tithes.

His leadership style was also marked by attempts to get others to fulfill their responsibilities. He told the officials and all their successors in this office that they should see to it that the Temple of God was not forsaken. He reminded the nobles that tolerating evil profaned the Sabbath and threatened to make their political situation even worse. He expected those who had intermarried to commit themselves to the Torah in the future, both for themselves and for their children. Emergency measures had to be followed by long-term, institutional changes.

### **Closing in Prayer**

Perhaps Nehemiah's prayers are the most memorable and most theologically important part of this chapter (13:14, 22, 29, 31). He wore his accomplishments as a badge before God and begged God not to let them be erased from the permanent records. He asked God to remember him, but prayed also that God would spare him because of the greatness of God's loyal love. Imprecations are hard prayers for us to understand, sometimes because we have never been in an impossible situation where the whole system seems to be against us, and sometimes because we are unwilling to say that our opponents are really trying to undercut God's reign.

Nehemiah prayed that God would remember everything for good. No doubt he included in this open-ended prayer his wall building program, the reform measures of chapter 13, and even his efforts to cancel debts in chapter 5. But ultimately he was simply confessing that God's remembrance of him was his only hope.

From beginning to end, Nehemiah lived as a man of prayer. What an amazing relationship with God he demonstrates. No matter how and where we are called to serve and to lead, would that each of us grow in our connectedness to God to gain wisdom, courage, comfort, hope (and more) by engaging wholeheartedly in the God-sized projects before each one of us.

Go in peace to love and lead as you serve the Lord.