

In a Fallen World, there are No Happy Endings

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Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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I believe we're going to be finishing our exposition of the books Ezra/Nehemiah this morning, 23 chapters between the two books, 10 chapters of Ezra and 13 of Nehemiah. If you've not been with us, we believe these were one book in the original, in fact, they are in the Hebrew Bible, Ezra/Nehemiah is one book, and so we have studied it all, sought to go verse by verse through the entire two book in our Bible. Anyway, so we are today coming to Nehemiah 13 and we're looking at how he ends this account, how the author of Ezra/Nehemiah wraps up our account and we're going to see it's with Nehemiah's diary again, in the sense that it returns to the focus of Nehemiah telling us exactly what he did in his own words. Part of the books of Ezra/Nehemiah are that, the taking of Nehemiah's recorded like diary and then put into this book. Many people believe Ezra is the one who compiled the book Ezra/Nehemiah but we don't know for sure because God hasn't told us.

Anyway, we come this morning and we come to the end of the books Ezra/Nehemiah, particularly the book Nehemiah, that part of it which is dealing with the rebuilding of the wall, and what we see if we're really thinking about it is an astonishing ending. So the title of the book this morning, I mean the title of the message this morning is "In a Fallen World, there are No Happy Endings." In a fallen world, there are no happy endings. Happily ever after is a fairy tale. It's not reality. It's never reality in this fallen world and we see that powerfully in this conclusion to the story of the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem in this conclusion of this portion of this book of Nehemiah. We see it and as we remember and I did some thinking about this this week, it's really astonishing that you're going to see he's going to talk to us about the time that has elapsed but the book of Nehemiah itself, Ezra/Nehemiah, first of all, the whole book of Ezra/Nehemiah is about three returns. It's about the people of God who've been exiled to Babylon because of their sin and disobedience, exiled for 70 years, and they make a return in three installments. They return from Babylon in three different installments, first under Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest to rebuild the temple in 538 BC they return, and then in 458 BC almost 80 years later, they return, a second return under Ezra, another group of exiles, Jews who have been exiled returned to Judah and Jerusalem and they come to help Ezra restore the law to its rightful place among the people of God, and then 13 years later under a man named Nehemiah, a third and final return from exile happens with the express purpose of rebuilding the walls. The walls of Jerusalem are broken down, the people are in great distress and so Nehemiah is raised up by God to lead a return and then

they come and you see in the 13 chapters of Nehemiah or the first 12 chapters this revival that happens. In fact, chapters 2 to 12, those 11 chapters, chapter 2 to chapter 12 cover basically a little less than four months in time. It's a quick movement of God upon the people of God. In fact, when you do the work, you see that in reality Nehemiah when he first hears about Jerusalem, it's late 446 BC, December of 446. He gets the word in Nehemiah 1 that the walls of Jerusalem are down, the people of Jerusalem are afflicted, the worship of God is not happening and he's brokenhearted over it. He begins fasting and praying and he prays for four months and around April 1, December 1 he got the news, around April 1 he goes into the king of Persia and risked his life to tell the king of Persia, I mean to be sad in the king's presence, the king asked him, "Why are you sad?" It was a death penalty to be sad in the presence of the king. He risked his life to plead for the cause of Jerusalem. The king grants him his heart's desire. He begins to gather the resources and he makes the trip back. It takes basically 60 days to travel by foot or on horseback from Persia, Susa to Jerusalem, at least a 55 day journey. So if he started out May 1 or something like that, or late April, he's arriving in Jerusalem late June. He spends three days there and it says he gets there, he arrives, three days later he goes and surveys the walls at night. He had jet lag from the trip, camel lag, worse than jet lag. And so he surveys the walls of Jerusalem. He sees how bad things are. He calls a meeting of the people and he tells them what straits we're in and we need to rebuild the wall. And then he gathers the resources together and we know almost to the day when they started the work because we know how long the work took and we know when they finished it. The work finished in 52 days. They rebuilt the whole wall of Jerusalem, a miracle, and they finished the work around September 15 or a little before September 15 because on the first day of the seventh month, which would be about September 15, they gather to worship the Lord.

So they probably finished the work around September 10. They began around July 20. They finish around September 10, and then September 15 they gather together, they have a preaching service. Remember they hear sermons preached for hours and hours all morning, four hours of preaching from the word of God. It sets out revival. They're brokenhearted by God's word. They hear God's word and how they've failed miserably. They begin wailing in agony and Nehemiah and the leaders say, "Be silent. Do not mourn. This is a day of joy. Go and prepare a feast." And so the people leave there, go and prepare a feast, and then they come back the next day, they're taught again from the Scriptures and in reading the Scriptures they see they're supposed to celebrate the seventh month the Feast of Tabernacles by actually living in tents, handmade booths. And so they make those booths toward the end of the month. They spend eight days doing that, probably now we're in October, early October, October 8, something like that. They spend a week doing that and they finish up and then they come together to repent.

In chapter 9, they confess their sins, they reinstitute the covenant and we talked about this, this is one of the great movements of God in Scripture. It is revival. Truly the return of the life of God to the people of God. It is evident in repentance. The people really turn from their sin, they turn from their sin back to God. It is a tremendous movement. It is a mountaintop and then he connects everything together by telling us all about the priests and the Levites, the people repopulating Jerusalem but it's still just a few more days and

they rededicate the wall of Jerusalem, probably around October 20. Nehemiah got back around June 20. All of this has happened. It's October 20. They rededicate the walls. Let's end the book. Why not end the book and they lived happily ever after? And what you're going to see, the first three verses could still be a part of that happily ever after but there is no happily ever after because he also tells us what he tells us between verse 4 and verse 31 of chapter 13, and what we're going to see is Nehemiah after they have this four month revival, he stays on as governor for 11½ more years, fully 12 years. He's governor and everything is going pretty well apparently. He goes back to Susa because he's called back by the emperor to go back to Susa, the capital city of Persia. He goes back. Then he's there for an unspecified amount of time, we don't know how long. Most scholars think three or four years. He then comes back to Jerusalem and things have completely fallen apart. The revival, the ground gained in the revival has been lost.

There is no happily ever after and there's a sense in which the message must be and the reason God put this in Scripture is because it happened but he didn't have to tell us about it. There was all kind of bad stuff that we're not told about. We're just told about what God wants us to know. But he ends this book apparently on the notes, and remember it's the last part of the narrative of the Old Testament. The Old Testament begins telling us from creation all the way and it ends with this account. This is the end of the narrative. Malachi probably wrote after this but he's a prophet. This is the narrative. This is the end of the Old Testament historical account. There will be 400 years of silence and then John the Baptist will begin preaching. So these are last words in the Old Testament. The importance of last words, and the last words of the last words are basically there is no happily ever after, in other words, to win a battle is not to win the war. No matter how great and decisive the victory in the battle, you get up tomorrow and you keep fighting and if you don't, you will find yourself overcome just like the people of Judah.

So reading that, we're going to read the text now, think about that. He's going to basically talk about four different horrible outcomes that have happened. In verses 4 to 9, he's going to talk about when Nehemiah comes back he finds the temple desecrated. In verses 10 to 14, worship has been suspended. Regular worship is not happening. In verses 15 to 22, the sabbath is now being regularly profaned. In verses 23 to 29, even the people are defiled. They are being hardened in sin and departing from God. All of this just a few years after Nehemiah has left.

So let's read God's word together. Nehemiah 13:1-31. "On that day they read," and this is right after the account of the celebration of worship on the walls of Jerusalem, dedicating the walls. Here we go. Chapter 13,

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,

Now what's interesting is this now prior to this is saying what happens in verse 4 to verse 31 is prior to what he just read in chapter 13, verses 1 to 3, which is somewhat confusing because the phrase "on that day," in Hebrew it can mean a lot of different things. It doesn't necessarily mean on that day, it means on a particular day and so 13:1-3 is actually, this is actually the last word on the book of Nehemiah and verses 4 to 31 are slipped in right between this, and so that's why the "prior to this" actually is clear in the text. Now prior to this and what he's going to tell us is what's happened in that intervening time since Nehemiah has left. So let's look at that now, verse 4,

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.

Let's pray together.

Father, we ask that You would help us now by Your Spirit to hear Your word. Open the eyes of our hearts that we might see and truly understand the wonderful things in Your law. Let us see our Savior and let us be more like Him. We pray in His name. Amen.

Nehemiah was quite a character, wasn't he? If you were really paying attention as we're reading, you're like it's almost embarrassing what's happening here. I had to resist the burden of trying to stop and explain about as we're reading through it because it's pretty shocking at times what he did. I mean, he takes action. He threatens the people that are outside the gates with violence, "I'm going to come against you with force." He doesn't mince words. And then we're told he contends when he sees what's happening, the people are speaking, the children are speaking these other languages and this intermarriage thing is not a racial thing at all, it's a spiritual thing. It's the fact that they're being raised up by ungodly Moabites and Ammonites. We know that because read the book of Ruth. Ruth

was a Moabitess and Scripture makes that real clear over and over and over again when you read Ruth. Ruth the Moabitess. Ruth the Moabitess. Ruth the Moabitess. Ruth the Moabitess left the gods of Moab and devoted herself to the God of Israel, the God of her mother-in-law Naomi and God welcomed her and made her the great-grandmother of King David and the ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's spiritual apostasy that is at stake here and it's evidenced by the fact that these children of these intermarriages are speaking the language not of the Jews which means what? They cannot understand the word of God. The word of God is shut off to them. They don't have Bible translations in every language at this point.

So it's a matter of great urgency and you see Nehemiah is a man of action and I want to put before you, I want you to think about this. We're going to focus on Nehemiah. I can't take time to talk about this much but I want you to consider this: the Lord Jesus Christ, an interesting thing when you read the gospels, you know, we think sometimes what we're seeing here is there's a place, when you understand the urgency of a situation, there is a time and a place for dramatic decisive action without apology, there's a time not to be nice, there's a time to be kind and loving and that means confronting boldly sin, and the Lord Jesus and God and those who belong to God and who are learning to think and walk like him will learn to do that. I mentioned the Lord Jesus. It's interesting, the gospel accounts when you put them all together, you have a picture of all of his earthly ministry. Once he starts his ministry, his ministry is bookended by one event that happens twice. What is that one event that happens twice? He cleanses the temple. He does it at the beginning of his ministry and he does it on the last week before he's crucified. He cleanses the temple. Twice he goes into the temple, he makes a cord and he drives out the moneychangers unapologetically, unashamedly, full of action and, in a sense, violent action, he takes back God's house. I think you see Nehemiah as a type of that. In fact, he does cleanse the temple. The first thing he does is get Tobiah out of the temple. The temple is being defiled by the man Tobiah.

Now what I want us to think about because, you know, to follow the Lord we have to let God's word continually instruct us. So one of the things that we see is that we need the word of God every moment of every day, you know, that's why Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." And we are called to be people who are always reforming. If you ask me if our church is a Reformed Baptist church, yes, it is and what does it mean to be Reformed? Well, there are a lot of things it means but the most important thing is this: always reforming, *semper reformanda* is the Latin phrase, always reforming, that is, that every time the word of God comes to us, we want to submit to it and we want to change. That means individually when the word of God comes and confronts sin, we want to turn from sin by looking to our Savior, by resting in Christ. When the word of God comes to us as a corporate body and shows us things we're doing wrong, we want to change our practice and make it obedient to the word of God. That's the essence of the Reformation, the Protestant Reformation was the recovery of the Scriptures and the authority of Scriptures. *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone, that was the thing, the foundation point upon which Luther really came to grips then with the gospel. If Scripture alone is the final authority, then it doesn't matter what the church or councils say ultimately, it's significant, we listen to it to

look at it but we test it by the word of God and if they contradict the word of God, we jettison what they say because Scripture alone is the authority and what you see is a man who lived like that in the example of Nehemiah, and this passage really is for us a call to follow his example.

There are no happy endings in this life. A mountaintop today is going to be followed by a valley tomorrow and maybe a whole lot more valleys day after day after day, so the question is how do you bear up? How do you live? Well, you follow the example of Nehemiah. What we need is to be committed to the Lord like he was and to be realistic people. I love the realism of the Bible. There's no airbrushing in Scripture. No airbrushing. It's just like it is. God tells it like it is, warts and all. They had a great revival. It was astounding. It was amazing and you'd think that would have carried them on a while and it would have been for this group of people, and they lived happily ever after, but that's not the way it is. That's not how it is in a fallen world because you wake up in the morning the day after God has moved in a powerful way and he's revealed his grace to you. It's true when you become a Christian, when you repent of your sins, you understand that you have nothing to commend yourself before God. All of us equally lost, hopeless, without any help in ourselves and the gospel comes and we see Jesus has done everything, and when you stop placing any hope in yourself and you put all of your hope in the finished work of Christ, his death in your place, his resurrection, union with Christ is our only hope and we unite ourselves to him, you're saved, you're transformed, and as Ted was saying, there are passages in the New Testament that talk about this, we were looking at one on Sunday, Colossians 3, Ephesians 2, that when you become a believer, you're seated in the heavenly places in Christ. You're accepted in the Beloved forever. You're reigning and ruling with Christ right now even though in the meantime you're in this sin-sick world and it's going to be that way every day. Every day there's a fight and the only reason there's not a fight is either sometimes Satan will kind of back off a little bit to lull us to sleep, sometimes the world, God just gives us a respite, occasionally it's not quite as bad, but in reality you always wake up in a war zone. The god of this age hates us, hates Christ, hates God, and he's determined to do everything he can to destroy the works of God.

We have the world, the flesh, and the devil to contend with every single day. Think about that. What an incredible axis of evil that is. The world, the flesh, and the devil. The world system, the complex of thoughts and values that the cultures that we live in impose upon us. And the god of this age is directing that, Satan directing the world system, the prince of darkness, to value all the wrong things, to hate God even though they claim to talk about God, they hate the true God. And so you're surrounded by worldliness, the devil himself is a roaring lion, 1 Peter 5:8. Be sober, be vigilant, your adversary the devil is like a roaring lion. I mean, you don't rest. Seriously, if you're walking through, you know, walking through a meadow around here, you feel pretty confident, you know? I mean, you might run into, it's possible you could run into, you know, it's maybe a bear, like, one in a hundred million chance of that, right? So you don't walk around, if you're normal thinking correctly, you don't walk around just being afraid the whole time in a meadow in Georgia even out in the country. You might see a coyote but he's not going to really want to do anything to you. You might see a snake who is more afraid of you than most of us

are of him. Dalton corrected me when I said that to him, the snake is more afraid of you than you are of him. Dalton said, "I highly doubt that." But think about it, if you were walking, though, in a beautiful sunlit meadow in the Serengeti when the grass is green, you would be thinking about what might be lurking around the corner. I mean, you've got leopards, cheetahs, lions, elephants. I don't want to go. But if you were there, you would be sober and vigilant. God says you have no choice. That's where you are. You are in that territory. Every day you get up and you walk through life, you have an adversary, the devil, who is like a roaring lion.

So the world system, the devil, and then you have the flesh, the sin nature, evil that is present within you. You find out not only evil outside all around you, personal evil is trying to undermine you and destroy you, you find evil present within you, Paul says, Romans 7. The enemy is within. He's all around you and he's within so there is no time to rest on your laurels from the most recent victory. The battle rages on until Jesus calls you home. You know, when you see that, this is what makes that day so much more wonderful. Peter says in 1 Peter 1, I think it's verse 13, prepare your minds for action. Prepare your minds for action. Be ready to fight. And he says this, "and set your hope fully on the grace to be given to you at the revealing of Jesus Christ." Prepare your minds for action in the meantime and long with expectancy on the day Jesus calls you home or he returns. That's the day of rest.

That's the day of an eternal happily ever after for those who belong to Christ but in this world there is none of that, and we see it graphically illustrated because they had this incredible mountaintop experience, the most thorough account of revival we have in the Old Testament, what an amazing act of God and yet things deteriorated so quickly. So now how do you live, then? How do you respond when you live in a world where there is no happily ever after? What are you supposed to do each day? Well, Nehemiah was a man of action and he was a man of prayer. Those two things, those are the two points this morning, to be a man or woman or boy or girl of action. Nehemiah was a man of action. He's our model. This passage is presenting him that way, an example.

He was a man of action. I mean, reading through what we just read, I counted at least 17 different actions Nehemiah took and I'm not counting when he sees things or he discovered things. I'm not counting that as an action, that's like him gaining knowledge, but once he saw something what he does is he takes action. He doesn't see things and then wonder for a while what I'm going to do about it. He sees things and he takes action. In fact, there's this pattern. He'll recognize something and then he immediately goes into action.

Look with me at this, you see it first in verse 7. This is where he finds out the temple is being defiled. "I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah." Tobiah is in the temple. Now think about this. The temple complex, the temple proper, the building, well, the temple itself is the walled courtyards, open courtyards that surround and lead up to the temple proper which is the building itself where the holy place and the most holy place are, where the veil separates the holy place from the most holy place, the Holy of Holies is the most holy place. The holy place, right? So the priests

go into that part of the building but the Jews can come into the other parts of the temple, the courtyard, and offer their offerings, and there are other buildings that have been built alongside it for storage in this area where the priests and Levites are ministering, and one of the things they had, they had rooms that we see were set aside, verse 5, they had prepared a room for Tobiah, "a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils and the tithes of grain, wine and oil." You see, that's where they stored the tithes. They take them out and they make room for this guy Tobiah.

Now those of you who have been with us remember Tobiah is one of the chief villains in the book of Nehemiah. He's Tobiah the Ammonite. He's an Ammonite. Isn't that interesting? Right after we read in verse 1 there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, verse 4 and 5, Tobiah, he doesn't bother reminding us he's an Ammonite because we already know it. It's been so clearly laid out in the book of Nehemiah. We were introduced to him in chapter 2. Turn back to chapter 2 for a minute. After they get there, Nehemiah gets there, he brings letters and look at verse 10. He's beginning to tell them he's come back to restore Jerusalem, he's come back to do some good things for Jerusalem. Verse 10, "When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel." So we know he then had, he inspects the walls that night or shortly after that, has a meeting with the people and they start building in chapter 3. Chapter 3, they begin to build the wall. Chapter 4, verse 1, "Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews." Why do these guys care so much about what's happening in Jerusalem? Because they're the enemies of God and they hate everything that God loves.

"He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria," this is chapter 4, verse 2. Sanballat says this, "'What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?' Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him," and this is what Tobiah said, "'Even what they are building if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!'" They're mocking the people of God.

Verse 7 of chapter 4, "Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry." Verse 8, "All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it." Verse 11 says they plotted among themselves, "They will not know," the Jews will not know, "or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work."

Tobiah and Sanballat are sworn enemies of the people of God and what we see in this chapter is both of them have intermarried into the family of the high priesthood, and one of them has a room, he's renting a room, as it were, or got a free room in the temple complex. I mean, this is unthinkable if you're thinking biblically. Now if you're thinking

in a compromised sort of way, compromised with the world, accommodate the world, well, yeah, he's from out of town. He's used to having a large area of space and for him to have to live in somebody's house and a spare, you know, rollaway or something, it's just not appropriate. Tobiah, after all, is one of the governors. He needs a place of honor. So Eliashib the high priest makes him a place in the temple. When Nehemiah hears it, he is rightly appalled. He cannot believe it. He doesn't call a meeting to say, "What should we do?" He goes in and he grabs the stuff and he takes it and he slings it out of the building. He takes it outside the temple. He empties everything out. "No, there's not going to be an Ammonite living in the house of God!" That is decisive action just like Jesus cleansing the temple. This is a place to worship the living God. The God of heaven has said, has prescribed how he's to be worshiped. We don't trample on his instructions. To trample on his word is to trample, to attempt to trample on his glory.

So he takes decisive action in that case. He finds out, then, that also, "Well, since there's no place to restore the tithes, the tithes haven't been coming in." Verse 10, "I also discovered," there you have him he's finding out what's happening. There's a spiritual sensitivity that comes with men who are walking with God and women who are walking with God. There's a sensitivity, a discovery. We find out something's not right here. He finds out that the portions that the Levites were supposed to have have not be given to them and the singers are not being cared for, and therefore they have no food, they have no sustenance. What have they done? They've gone back out of Jerusalem to take care of themselves. They've got to have something to eat. Now this was part of the covenant. They covenanted to take care of the Levites. This was what the renewal was. "We promise we will not let the house of God be forsaken," and yet here 15 years later the house of God is forsaken.

What does he do? Verse 11, "So I reprimanded the officials and said, 'Why is the house of God forsaken?'" That word "reprimanded" is a strong word. It means to, in some translations it says "rebuked, contended with, argued with." It comes from a word which means "fight" originally, like a hand-to-hand fight. Now it doesn't mean that, literally it's like we use words like that too, words that come from certain areas and then they come to have meaning. But it does have a strong meaning about a verbal exchange that is intense and pointed, and the argumentation is strong. Nehemiah is reprimanding them. He is contending with the officials. That word is used also in verse 17 and verse 25, the same word.

So after he does that, he gathers together all the Levites. He takes action, sends word, "Bring them back." He restores them to their posts. He tells Judah to bring the tithe in and there's a sense in which God already does something miraculous because Judah brings the tithe in. And then takes action to appoint this organizational, he's an organizational genius. He's got some administrative skills and so he puts in charge of the storehouse these people and everything is good, then he prays.

Now in verse 15, you see another action, another problem. He sees a third problem, "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," end of the verse, "I

admonished them." In verse 17, "I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day?'" And he reminds them, "Did not God send you away to Babylon partly because of your profanation or your profaning of the sabbath day? You continually desecrated the sabbath so He gave you 70 years, 10 sevens of the rest, the land rested for 70 years because you did not rest before Me."

Then he deals with not only the people of Israel, he deals with the folks that are coming in to sell. I mean, such wisdom. He gets guards to shut the gates like they're supposed to, shut the gate from before the sabbath until afterwards. He's walking around the walls. He sees all these people out there that are waiting for their opportunity to sell things to people, maybe they'll come outside the gate and we can sell stuff to them. And he goes out and he says, "Listen, you guys get out of here and if you don't, I'm going to use force against you. You're warned right now." He's a man of action.

Now listen, we have to make a trajectory adjustment with this. Now on this side of the gospel, on this side of the fullness of the gospel that comes in Christ, gift of the Holy Spirit, we're not to be fighting or actually pulling out anybody's hair, that this was something a part of that time in redemptive history that God was teaching the people through more... I mean, remember we're talking about typology in general, that Jerusalem is a type of the church and the people of God are actually the temple, and so in the same way the actions that he's taken are not exactly what we're supposed to do but it shows something about the tone and tenor of the spiritual response that we're to have. We won't physically, you should not physically strike anybody, in fact, that's a disqualification for an elder. An elder is not to be a striker, not pugnacious is the word that you find in some of the translations, not a fighter. But in this point in history, it was actually, things were done visibly and they also did stuff like put ashes on their head. They shaved their heads at times. They wore sackcloth. We're not to do any of that now. That was all a type to show us what needed to happen in the heart and so in the same way, this is telling us what needs to happen in our hearts.

But he takes great care to make sure that the sabbath is no longer profaned, and then the fourth area in verse 23, "In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab." Ashdod, the land of the Philistines. Ammon, the Ammonites. Moab, the Moabites. Just like he talked about in verse 3. Their children aren't speaking the language and he argues with them basically, after he gets with them and look at his action, "I contended with them." This is the same word actually "reprimanded" in verse 17 is the same word translated "contended" in the New American Standard that I'm reading from in verse 25.

"And I cursed them." Now he did not use curse bad language. When the Bible talks about cursed, it means he called down the curses of the covenant upon them. "You accepted the terms of the covenant, you renewed the covenant with God, and the covenant with God in the old covenant was if you do these things, blessed are you, and if you don't do these things, then cursed are you. You're not doing these things therefore I'm calling down

curses on you." Of course, the goal was to bring them to repentance so they could be renewed again.

He struck them. He did hit them. He pulled out their hair. This was apparently, this wasn't a rush of human anger and fury. Like I said, that's why I think thinking about Jesus what he does in the cleansing of the temple is so helpful because Jesus is the God-man. Everything he does is perfect. But when he cleanses the temple, he takes a cord, he overturns tables. He doesn't say, "Hey, guys, you need to get out. There's no more of this." He doesn't speak in measured calm tones like he normally would. He turns over the tables and he drives them out. There's a place for that kind of decisive action and for us that means there is a place for intense spiritual indignation that moves us to address sin and that's what we're seeing in Nehemiah, and pulling out their hair and striking them, part of what that was doing, it was a picture for all the other people, "Look at the severity of this sin." It was a visible manifestation of how far they had fallen, how quickly they had fallen and how far they had fallen.

And he reminds them, "Didn't Solomon, remember the great king of Israel, no king like him, loved by God, loving God, yet the foreign women even caused him to sin. When he married ungodly women, he worshiped their gods." Deuteronomy 7:1-6 makes this point. That's the reason they weren't to intermarry at all because if you intermarry, you will worship their gods so that when the people of the land wanted to come to Israel and be a part, they were welcomed in. This is spiritual separation. The application of this is as a Christian you should never marry an unbeliever. There's nothing about race here. You can marry anyone of any other race. Race is actually a social construct. There's only one race, Adam's race, we just have different pigmentation. Different culture backgrounds, sure, everybody does but we're one race and so it doesn't matter what color the person is or what ethnic background they come from, they're all from Adam's race. But it does matter this: if you belong to Christ, you only marry someone else who belongs to Christ, and if you don't do that, then you are potentially defiling yourself in extraordinary ways, asking for trouble.

Now if you have, the good news of the gospel is repent. God will help you restore the years the locusts have eaten but you have chosen a path that has consequences. So on the front end, if you're dating someone who is an unbeliever, stop it. Don't make me come and pull out your hair. I promise I won't do that. But seriously, stop it. There's no such thing as evangelistic dating. You follow Jesus and just tell that person that, "I'm going to follow Jesus. We don't have in common the most one central thing we must have in common is Christ. If we don't have that in common, we have nothing in common. What fellowship has light with darkness?" And if you make that stand and you turn away from that relationship, that's the best chance that unbeliever ever has of knowing the beauty of Jesus Christ that you would turn away from someone you care about like this because Christ is supremely important. That's evangelistic ending of dating. If you love them, you care about them, love Jesus more and turn away from the relationship and pray that God saves them and don't sit around waiting and looking to see. You just go about your life following Christ and thinking about other people and see what the Lord does. Our God is

a God who loves to do amazing things when people are willing to submit to him and trust him.

So he was a man of action. You see that, he took action and so we have to take action and one of the things we have to watch out for in our circles because we have a high view of the sovereignty of God, part of Reformed theology is we have a high view of the sovereignty of God, is we like to trust in the fact that God is sovereign and so we then don't take action. We blame it on God. He's in control, he's in control. If he wanted to deal with this, he would. If you see it, you need to address it. The fact that you see it is part of God sovereignly addressing it. He's trying to get his people to address sin, to go to one another when there's concern, confront sin, call people to repentance. And to do it, I mean, humbly, yes, and, listen, there are other passages that speak of how we should like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word fitly spoken. You speak in a way to be heard. You love someone and your love for them encourages their heart to receive it, and you come humbly so that confronting sin in the truest sense is like Jesus washing the disciples' feet. If we wash one another's feet, it's like we're addressing sin and washing feet. Think of the humility of that. But listen, this passage isn't talking about that. This passage is giving the other truth the you and I need to hear and that is confront sin. Confront it. It's a matter of life and death. Deal with it.

That's how Nehemiah's acting. He understands that the well-being of the people of God is at stake, and more than that, the glory of God is at stake, and there has to be that urgency, and so when we get it all right, you have that urgency that comes with tenderness but there's an urgency that will not bend, will not compromise when you speak the truth in love and the good news is, listen, none of us has the ability to do that. That's why we need Jesus. One of the things we have to learn to do when we're having confrontation is, "Lord Jesus, love this person through me. Give me Your heart toward them. Help me speak the truth in love. Help me see what You see and feel what You feel." That's what Nehemiah, Nehemiah saw what God saw and he felt what God felt and that's why he was called to action and urgency. We need to see what God sees and to feel what he feels and then to act accordingly.

So we need to be men of action, people of action. Secondly and this is so wonderful how this unfolds in the book, we need to be men of prayer for he was a man of prayer. We need to be people of prayer, Christians who pray. Four times in the 13th chapter Nehemiah stops to pray. In fact, the whole book of Nehemiah, that this part of that book Ezra/Nehemiah is the account mostly of his journal that starts with him getting word about Jerusalem. What we see is he prays and prays and prays. Eleven different times Nehemiah prays in this book, 10 of them we're told what he prayed.

First in chapter 1, verse 5 to 11. Let's walk through this. Turn back to chapter 1 of Nehemiah. They told him, he asked about Jerusalem, they told him that the people were in great distress and reproach, the wall is broken down, its gates are burned with fire. Verse 4, "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. I said, 'I beseech You, O LORD,'" and then he has his prayer from verses 5 to 11.

I mentioned that it's four months. How do you know that? Well, look at verse 1 of chapter 1, it happened in the month of Kislev, that is, November/December, that he got this report and he starts fasting and praying. Then in chapter 2, verse 1, "Now it came in the month of Nissan," that is, March/April. So he's fasting and praying and beseeching the Lord of heaven this essential prayer and this is his heart for four months. You see it was because he was a man of prayer that he was a man of action. You must have this to be a man of godly action. He was a man who spent time with the Lord, so much time with the Lord mourning over what God was mourning over, seeking God's face, calling out to God to deal with it, and the Lord showed him then the answer is you've got to go, and he went into the king, risked his life, and then the king gave him the word and he knew God's hand was upon him and he went back with the boldness of the Lord because he now shared the heart of God. You see, prayer, one of our misnomers of prayer, one of our misunderstandings of prayer that is so critical that we get this right is prayer does not change in the truest sense. I mean, prayer does change things because God's ordained that it does but prayer doesn't change God's mind, prayer changes you. That's what the purpose of prayer is so that we commune with God and then we want what God wants over time because we've spent time with him. We take our burdens, yes, you take your concerns, yes, he cares about them and he does say, "You have not because you ask not." Prayer does change things. It makes a difference but the Lord is not only mainly changing circumstances, the thing he's really changing is he's changing us.

So Nehemiah lived a life of prayer. So chapter 1, verses 5 to 9 we have that. Then chapter 2, verse 4, here's the second time he prays, "the king said to me, 'What would you request?'" After he saw his countenance, he told about the city being broken down. The king says, "What would you request?" And Nehemiah says, "So I prayed to the God of heaven. I said to the king." He prays right then, "Lord, help me." And then he lays out his request to the king.

Turn over to chapter 4. We got introduced to Tobiah the Ammonite earlier in verse 3 of chapter 4 when he was talking about the wall would fall down if a fox jumped on it. Nehemiah's response, look at his righteous indignation. This is Nehemiah 4:4, "Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders." He prays a prayer of imprecation upon them and there's a place for that. If people will not submit to God and they hate God, then we can pray occasionally like this and we're to love our enemies but we're to love God so much. Then verse 9, after they hear about the conspiring against them, verse 9, "But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night."

Chapter 6, verse 9, after he finds out about a secret plot to kill him from Sanballat, the Horonite, he says, "For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, 'They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done.'" He said, "But now, O God, strengthen my hands." He stops to pray again. Verse 14, "Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the

rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me." There were false prophets hired by these guys Sanballat and Tobiah who were enemies of God, false prophets acting like they speak in the name of Yahweh and they come and they try to intimidate Nehemiah and here he's praying, "Lord, deal with them." He's not taking vengeance himself, he's dealing with them, take them to the Lord.

Then chapter 13, four times we see it. In verse 14 we saw this, "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds." Verse 22, the end of verse 22, "For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness." Verse 29, "Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites." And the last words in the book, verse 31, "Remember me, O my God, for good."

Nehemiah was a man who communed with God. Because he communed with God, he saw what God saw and he felt what God felt, and he felt the urgency of the moment and he acted in accordance and he did what he knew to do. It's interesting, these four prayers in chapter 13 don't, he doesn't pray before he takes action. Now I think he is praying. He's not just telling us about it because he's a man of prayer. The Bible tells us to pray without ceasing but the prayers that he records for us are prayers after he takes action. That's instructive. When you already know what to do, don't ask God what to do. Ask God for grace to do what he's called you to do. You can ask him for grace, you can ask him for enablement but don't ask him what to do. You already know. "There's an Ammonite in the temple, Lord, what should I do?" No, he doesn't do that. He throws the Ammonite out of the temple. "They're profaning the sabbath, Lord, what should I do?" He doesn't ask him, he does it. In each case, he acts on what he knows. The word of God has spoken clearly to these things.

We do pray in the sense of asking, "Lord, fill me with Your Spirit, fill me with Your grace, but I'm not asking You for direction. I know what to do." I mean, ask him for direction for how to say it, yes. I don't mean don't pray but isn't that instructive? He takes action. I don't know about you, but I feel like I've been so convicted as I've looked at this because I tend to be slow sometimes to act when I need to be fast, and there's a place for being slow, slow to speak, slow to anger, right? Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, that's part of wisdom. But when something is clear and you know it, act for the glory of God. It's like the story of the Jews when they were sinning with the Moabites, of all people, as recorded in Numbers. After Balaam had tried to curse them and God would not curse them, he only blessed them, Balaam gave this instruction to Balak, the king of Moab, "The way to get them is to entice them into sexual immorality." And so they sent over their young women all dressed up and attractive and they seduced the Jewish men and God sent a plague upon the Jewish men. He was pouring out his wrath upon them and the son of Aaron, Eliezer, picks up a spear and drives it through a man who is having relations with a Moabite woman. He kills both of them with one spear and it was this moment that stopped the plague. Now again, that's old covenant. We're not to be hurting anyone. Jesus said we are to turn the other cheek. We don't, just like he said to Peter, we don't, he who lives by the sword dies by the sword. We're not people of the sword

anymore, not the physical sword but we are people of the sword this, and we are to use the word of God and wield the word of God without compromise and without fear.

It's a lot to think about but the Lord doesn't want us to be timid where we should be bold. We're to love him and love others but love truly does act. It confronts. You know, there's a moment to take decisive action. Think about that. If somebody was, you know, beating someone, you know, like stabbing them, trying to kill them, the police officer is not supposed to say, "Excuse me, sir. This isn't right for you to do that. I want to encourage you not to do that." No, he shoots the person or he takes them down. It's a moment for action and that's the way it is for the body of Christ. There are moments like that where we must take action and God help us have wisdom to do that, and I think we need to do it a lot more than we do. I know I do.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we thank You for Your grace and Your mercy. Thank You that You are a God who saves sinners, who none of us, Lord, we are all conceived in iniquity, brought forth in sin, no good in us, only Jesus, only Jesus, Lord, is worthy of You. And yet when You make us Your children, You make us people who are to become more like Him and to help one another become more like Him, and that means admonishing one another, teaching one another, speaking the truth to one another, encouraging one another, and knowing when we should encourage and when we should admonish, when we should rebuke, when we should reprove, when we should listen lovingly and gently. We need Your Spirit to help us but, Lord, Your word has been clear and help us to be people who when we know what the Scripture says, we do it. And help us to become like that by becoming people of prayer who commune with You, who learn in Your presence to see what You see and to feel what You feel. And we pray this all in Jesus' name and for His glory. Amen.