

# O Church, Hope in the LORD

*Forgiveness After Great Sin*

**Psalm 130:1** *A Song of Ascents.*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

<sup>2</sup> O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of **my pleas for mercy!**

<sup>3</sup> If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

<sup>4</sup> But with you there is **forgiveness**, that you may be feared.

<sup>5</sup> I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

<sup>6</sup> my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

<sup>7</sup> O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.

<sup>8</sup> And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

**Neh 13:15** 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.**

<sup>16</sup> Tyrians 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!

<sup>17</sup> Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day?"

<sup>18</sup> 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."

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice.

<sup>21</sup> 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." From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath.

<sup>22</sup> 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."

**Psalm 131:1** *A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

<sup>2</sup> But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned

**Neh 13:23** In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.

<sup>3</sup> O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.

<sup>25</sup> And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?"

<sup>28</sup> And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me.

<sup>29</sup> Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

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### **PSALM 130-131; NEHEMIAH 13:15-22; 23-29**

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# Sin and Hope

REMNANTS ARE SAVED FROM catastrophes. The church and those saved by grace are God's remnant. This is good news, and it is what we saw last week as we considered Psalms 128-129 and its parallel Nehemiah testimonies. As we looked at these, I stated what I believe **the greatest catastrophe** anyone can and does live through. **Sin**. I did not expand on that, because I knew what was coming this week. Because of our passages today, we will now do that.

Sin is never an easy thing to talk about. Who wants to be told that they are sinning? Who likes being caught in a sin? Who, on their way to commit a sin wants to hear someone spout off about how wrong that is. I can tell you my children don't.

We could talk for a long time about the desperate situation both our culture and our churches find themselves in today in this regard, where no one wants to admit they are sinning. I might add that with the culture this is due in part because of the churches refusal to use its prophetic voice to speak truth to it, or even its own people. People won't admit anything when there is no prophetic voice to speak

out that something is evil. But that would get us too sidetracked. It is enough to say that when it comes to sin, no one who is committing it wants to be told that it is wrong. That's why it is so easy to act so badly in those moments.

What is sin? According to the **Children's Catechism**, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." I've always thought it remarkable that this is found in a *children's* catechism, since even I have a hard time understanding what that means. But English changes (we don't use "want" in this antiquated way anymore), so I shouldn't be too hard on myself.

There are two parts to this definition. They can basically be summarized as **omission** and **commission**; omit and commit. "Want of conformity" is an **omission**. It is not doing something you should do. "Transgression of" is a **commission**. It is doing something you should not do. Very often in our public confession of sin we say something like, "We have sinned both in what we have done and in what we have not done." This is what the catechism means.

But omission and commission against what? **Against the law**. Sin presupposes law. "Where there is no law there is no transgression" (**Rom 4:15**). "Everyone who makes a

practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness” (1Jn 3:4). But “law” is only a step in the right direction.

Law presupposes something else. It presupposes a **Law-Giver**. This Law-Giver is, by definition, someone powerful and authoritative who can tell others what is right and wrong. When we are talking about moral law which is always right or always wrong (i.e. loving God with all your heart, loving your neighbor as yourself), then the Law Giver is authoritative over everyone to whom those laws apply. And those laws apply to every person created in the image, which means they apply to all.

In other words, this explains why this is such a hard thing to talk about. Sin necessitates that there is a God; this God commands everyone to do things; and this God has authority over everyone. **Sinners just don't like** that very much. It destroys their feelings of autonomy, independence, or master of their own destiny. Which is why they run from God. In our flesh, **Christians don't either**, which is why we still sin. But in our new-man renewed in the image of God, because he has sought us when we were not seeking him, because he has given us new hearts and affections for him,

and new thoughts about understanding right and wrong, we do like it. And this in turn presupposes something else. **This God has given we who were lost, hope.** If we would live like this were true, what a testimony it would be to the lost.

## **Two Great Sins in Nehemiah's 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Testimonies**

This is the kind of thinking we need to have in order to properly receive the messages in our Nehemiah passages today. Again, we are technically studying the Psalms. But in a fascinating analysis that several scholars have been working on for over 100 years, the suggestion is that the Psalms of Ascent (**Ps 120-134**) were placed in the order that they were as a way of leading the people of Ezra and Nehemiah's day through a week long liturgical **Feast of Tabernacles** which corresponded to the Testimonies of Nehemiah, that the great difficulties he underwent in order to bring about Reformation after the captivity might never be forgotten.

Continuing to look at these songs using this theory, **Psalm 130** corresponds to **Nehemiah 13:15-22** while **Psalm 131** corresponds to **vv. 23-29**. We will look at the two

Nehemiah passages first, as they are both similar in that they both deal with specific sins. The first sin deals with a topic that most Christians, let alone non-Christians, think almost nothing of today. For that matter, so does the second.

## *The Sabbath Day*

The testimony is clearly marked by the opening, “**In those days...**” (**Neh 13:15**). A new story is about to unfold. In those days, Nehemiah saw people in Judah doing something. They were “**treading winepresses on the Sabbath.**” Moreover, they were loading up heaps of grain, putting them on donkeys, and bringing it along with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of other things into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. Then it says, “**And I warned them on the day when they sold food.**”

It seems to me that best way to proceed here is to think about **the original context of the Sabbath** in order to understand where it comes from, as many are confused by this. Then, we should look at **how this played itself out in Nehemiah’s day**. Finally, we should think a little about it for **us today**.



The most well-known place we find the Sabbath discussed in the OT is **the Ten Commandments**. It is the fourth and last commandment of the Ten that deal with our relationship to God. The commandment itself is very short, “**Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy**” (**Ex 20:8; Dt 5:12**). It then adds two verses about **work**, which forbid basically anyone, including slaves or animals from being put to heavy labor on the Sabbath (**Ex 20:9-10; Dt 5:13-14**). This is in accordance with the meaning of the word. Sabbath means “Rest.” Therefore, working on the day is the opposite.

From here, the commandment gets a little more complicated. Because it is found in two different books, with two different endings, we need to talk about both of those. Exodus roots the commandment in **creation**. “**For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.**” In other words, “sabbathing” is a creation ordinance first. If this is true, would we not expect to find the pagans remembering it? In fact, we do.

A Sumerian creation story tells about the seven-day temple building project which provides a resting place for Ningirsu and his consort Bau. Then, there is a seven day ceremony commemorating its completion.<sup>1</sup> An Egyptian creation story has the god come to rest after making everything through divine speech.<sup>2</sup> The Canaanite *Baal Cycle* has Baal build a place of rest for himself free from all siege on the top of the holy mountain in six day where upon the seventh he takes his rest.<sup>3</sup> The Babylonian creation story

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<sup>1</sup> “*The building of Ninĝirsu’s temple,*” Gudea Cylinders A and B, 1182-1202 (Cyl. B, 14.21–23): “The temple towered upwards in full grandeur, unparalleled in fearsomeness and radiance. Like a boat it ..... and ..... Its owner, the warrior Ninĝirsu, came out as the daylight on the dais of Ĝir-nun. Its ..... resting on supports was like the blue sky in all its splendour. Its standards and their caps (?) were Ninĝirsu himself emanating fearsomeness; their leather straps stretched out in front of them were green snake-eater birds bathing. Its owner, the warrior Ninĝirsu, stood like Utu in his most fascinating blue chariot. Its throne, standing in the *guena* hall, was An’s holy seat which is sat upon joyfully. Its bed, standing in the bedroom, was a young cow kneeling down in its sleeping place. On its holy quilt (?), strewn with fresh herbs, Mother Bau was resting comfortably with Lord Ninĝirsu.” <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.1.7#>. Gudea Cylinders 617-624. “It took one year to bring the great stones in slabs and it took another year to fashion them, although not even two or three days did he let pass idly. Then it needed a day’s work to set up each one but by the seventh day he had set them all up around the house.” And 1211-1223 (B 17.19): “When his master entered the house, for seven days the slave woman was allowed to become equal to her mistress and the slave was allowed to walk side by side with his master. But the ritually unclean ones could sleep only at the border of his city.”

<sup>2</sup> “Ptah come to rest after making everything and every divine speech as well, having given birth to the gods, having made their towns, having founded their homes, having set the gods in their cult-places, having made sure their bread-offerings, having founded their shrines” (*Memphite Theology* Col. 61).

<sup>3</sup> It is “the throne of his kingship, the place of rest<sup>3</sup> from the siege of his dominion” (Baal and Yam, CTA 1.4.4.20-25), also KTU 1.4 vi 17-38.

*Enuma Elish* likewise has the gods building a temple so that they can finally get rest after creation.<sup>4</sup> Even **Greeks** thought of the seventh day as holy. The Church historian **Eusebius** explains, “Indeed, the entire cosmos of all living and growing things revolves around the seventh day. It is called ‘sabbath’ and is translated ‘rest.’ Both Homer and Hesiod [... Linus too], having taken information from our books, say clearly that it is holy.”<sup>5</sup> This doesn’t mean Gentiles went around worshiping on the Seventh Day like the Jews did. It does show that they understood the transcendence of the commandment at least to some degree.

The Commandment in Deuteronomy ends quite a bit differently. Instead of focusing on the Sabbath’s applicability to everyone, it focuses on the **peculiarity of the nation of Israel**. “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

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<sup>4</sup> “He founded his dwelling (temple) upon Apsu, he secured Mummu, held him firm by a lead-rope. After Ea had captured and vanquished his foes, Had won the victory over his opponents, In his chamber, in profound quiet, he rested. He called it ‘Apsu,’ meaning ‘They Recognize Sanctuaries’” (*EE* 1.71-76). For more on this see my sermon Sabbath Enthronement, Genesis 2:1-3, <http://www.rbcnc.com/Genesis%202.1-3%20Sabbath%20Enthronement.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> **Eusebius**, *Preparation for the Gospel* 13.12 (also Clement). **Hesiod**, “The first, the fourth, the seventh a holy day.” “And on the seventh again the sun shines bright.” **Homer**, “And soon the seventh returned, a holy day.” “It was the seventh day, and all was done.” **Linus**, “All things are finished on the seventh dawn.” “Good is the seventh day, and seventh birth.”

Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

Exodus 20:8-11	Deuteronomy 5:12-15
<p><sup>8</sup> Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.</p>	<p><sup>12</sup> Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.</p>
<p><sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work,</p>	<p><sup>13</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work,</p>
<p><sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.</p>	<p><sup>14</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.</p>
<p><sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."</p>	<p><sup>15</sup> You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.</p>

What I'm about to say is important to understand rightly. The Ten Commandments *as moral law* are transcendent, and they are written on the hearts of even the

most darkened Gentile (**Rom 2:14-15**). Everyone is in some sense held accountable to them, because everyone knows about them. But the Ten Commandments *as commandments written on tablets of stone* are peculiar to the nation of Israel. Though Yahweh is the Creator, he only chose Israel to be his treasured possession. Sometimes, like with “You shall not commit adultery,” this distinction isn’t very important. But when it says, “**You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt**” does not refer to all nations, but only to Israel.

This means that there are particularities surrounding Sabbath observance that were peculiar to the nation of Israel. All the nations knew about sabbathing. But **no other nation** was told that if a boy picked up sticks on the day that he had to be stoned. No other nation had multiple sabbaths that took place during annual feasts, sabbaths that weren’t even on the seventh day. But Israel did. And the laws regarding the vital importance of their keeping Sabbath were serious, so serious that it says if they wouldn’t give the land its due seventh year rest because they wanted to plant crops and disobey God, then he would ensure that even it

gets its rest by making it lay desolate while the enemies who have taken her over are in it (**Lev 26:34**).

It is into this very situation that **Nehemiah** comes. It says, “**Tyrians also, who lived in the city...**” (**Neh 13:16**). This refers to the Gentiles who lived in great sea-port town of Tyre north of Israel. They were not Jews, and their Gentile practices had them bringing in “**fish and all kinds of goods**” and selling them “**on the Sabbath.**” This was bad, because now the Jews were back in their land. But they didn’t seem to understand or care about their own law. For it says the Tyrians “**sold them ... to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself!**” The people were buying their goods on the Sabbath.

So, Nehemiah “**confront[s] the nobles of Judah**” and said, “**What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? 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**” (**13:17-18**). We now can see why this was such a terrible thing! This is why sin is such a great catastrophe. It creates ever increasing catastrophes of judgment!

So what does he do? It says that as soon as it grew dark before the Sabbath, he ordered the doors of the city shut and stationed his servants at the gates to make sure “that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day” (19). This took a little time for the Gentiles to get the point. At first, they just slept outside the city gates (20). But Nehemiah warned them that God was reclaiming his city and that this business would no longer be tolerated. He threatened them (21), and then commanded the Levites to purify themselves and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy (22). Its tough business being a leader. Not for the faint of heart. And it had to be difficult for Nehemiah. Thus, the Testimony ends with a usual prayer, “Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.” Everyone may be against him; he prays God is not too.

## *Intermarriage*

At this point, rather than looking at the song, let’s look at [the next Testimony](#), since it has a similar kind of theme. In fact, this entire chapter is reforming the people of the evil

in their midst. It began with a renewal of separation, a key idea found in the Mosaic law that God's people were to be separate from the nations, very much unlike them in their behavior and practice (**Neh 13:1-3**). In that light, Nehemiah cleanses the temple (as we saw last time, **4-14**), then he enforces the Sabbath (**15-22**), and now he is going to cleanse the people of another great evil.

This is an evil we have seen previously, when we were told that the enemies of Nehemiah had actually **married into the families of the rich nobility** of Israel (**6:18; 13:4**). It is time to put an end to that practice. The testimony begins, “**In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab**” (**13:23**). It is important to remember that these are the very people from which **Nehemiah's enemies** came earlier in the book (see **Neh 4:7**). They are Canaanites and cousins of Israel. It even says in the first verse of this chapter (anticipating the need to get rid of Tobiah the Ammonite), “**no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God**” (**13:1**) because of what they did to Moses in the desert so long ago (**2**).

A practical matter is discussed first. “**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” (24). This isn’t racism, but rather, it is deep concern for the law. In other words, how are they going to know God’s law if they can’t even speak the language it is written in?

So, Nehemiah again confronts (25). But this time he adds a curse. Even more, he actually “beat some of them and pulled out their hair.” This may sound brutal, but given the fact that any number of things could have been worse (excommunication like Ezra had done for the same sin, flogging with whips, death penalty, forcing them to divorce, etc.), perspective should be kept in mind. In fact, he did excommunicate one of them, one of the sons of Jehoiada (28), which he did because this was a clear case of the priests themselves being foreigners in the temple, and this simply could not be tolerated.

Furthermore, it is probable that those he is beating are not common Jews, but rather the nobles. This is because of vs. 26, “Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of sun women...?” He could have quoted laws that pertained to all Jews (Ex 34:16; Deut 7:3) regarding intermarriage. Instead, he chose the example of the king, which fits well

with nobility. Furthermore, Nehemiah says, “Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women” (27)? He would never say this to a common Jew, but only to someone who had authority over the people. The point is, Nehemiah didn't go around beating everyone he saw. He was making an example out of the leadership, which is held to a much higher standard.

So it says he made them take an oath in the Name of God that they would no longer commit this violation of the law (Neh 13:25). It concludes with another prayer. “Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites” (29).<sup>6</sup> Why does it keep mentioning these prayers? Because it shows that Nehemiah knows he must stand before the LORD himself. And he can, which is why he is even able to pray. He is only doing what is right according to the law and he relies on God to justify him.

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<sup>6</sup> **Going Deeper:** This last verse describes, “The covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.” This refers to priestly or Levitical covenant, a covenant often missed by Reformed covenant theologies. But it is a vital and separate covenant from the other covenants in the Bible, including especially the Mosaic covenant. It even has its own book named after it: Leviticus! This covenant is important to the baptism discussion and until people are willing to deal with it, those discussions will never be able to move forward. See my book *Waters of Creation: A Biblical-Theological Study of Baptism*.

## Contemporary Sins

It's quite obvious that what Nehemiah is doing is **cleaning house**. It was the natural progression once the wall was up and the city was secure. First, protect the outside, then clean out the inside. **This cleaning is what it means to reform something**. Nehemiah was reforming the people by **going back** to the law of Moses and ensuring as a good leader that they keep that which is most important, so that they might not sin against God and go back into captivity, or worse, be forsaken by him altogether. But **what about us today**, and **how do these things relate to our Psalms?**

Let's think about these two sins of Israel in light of the Christian message. The first and most important thing that needs to be said is that no matter what grey areas there may be in these commandments in terms of how they are to be followed today, there is **some kind of continuity** in both of them. In other words, we are not free from obeying the law of God in *every* sense, even though these are Israelite laws. This should be obvious when it comes to thinking about the Ten Commandments, but unfortunately, many are blinded, especially the regarding the Sabbath.

If Sabbath is a creation ordinance that everyone knew about, then something of the idea of resting is **built into creation**. And of course it is. Just go look outside right now at all the people recharging their batteries by not being in church or work! But we are not pagans. We are Christians, and our religion did not begin in 30 A.D. with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Instead, we Christians are called the true circumcision, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, the Israel of God. This is OT language. We have God's word and we know what it said to Israel of old.

Now, I understand that there has always been, since the very beginning of the church, differences of opinion within Christianity on how sabbath should be kept.<sup>7</sup> But there was never any dispute that Christians were still to gather together at least one day a week to do the things they did in the synagogues: pray, hear the word, sing the scripture, etc. This has always happened. Thus, we read in *The Apostolic*

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<sup>7</sup> Some interesting articles I was reading this week about it include: **Jon-English Lee**, "Second Century Witnesses to the Sabbath and Lord's Day Debate," *Churchman* (Autumn 2014): 231-46; **Michael D. Morrison, Thomas C. Hanson, and Ralph G. Orr**, "Sabbath and Sunday in History," Grace Communion International (2014). <https://www.gci.org/files/Sab-Sun.pdf>. I looked for **C. W. Dugmore**, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office* (Westminster, 1964) pp. 28-36, but couldn't find it. It looks interesting too.

*Constitutions* (which are dated from possibly the middle of the second century),

O Lord, Almighty One, you created the cosmos through Christ, and marked out a sabbath day for a remembrance of this ... therefore, celebrating the resurrection festival on the Lord's day, we rejoice over the one who indeed conquered death, having brought to light life and immortality ... You commanded [the Israelites] to keep sabbath, not giving an excuse for laziness, but rather an opportunity for reverence toward God, for knowledge of your power, for hindrance of evil ... for the sake of teaching, for the exultant joy of the number seven. Because of this you appointed one seven ... and with this ... forgiveness ... Every sabbath you permitted (them) not to work, so that no one would desire to let drop from his mouth a word in anger on the day of the sabbath ... For the sabbath is a rest from creation, a completion of the cosmos, a seeking out of laws, thankful praise to God on behalf of those things which he has freely given to men. All of which the Lord's day surpasses, showing forth: the Mediator himself, the Supervisor, the Lawgiver, the cause of the resurrection, the firstborn of all creation, the divine Word; and Man, the one born of Mary alone, without a husband; who lived holily as a citizen, who was crucified

under Pontius Pilate, and having died, is also the one having arisen from the dead. As the Lord's day, it advises us to offer to you, O Master, thanksgiving on behalf of everything.

(Apostolic Constitutions 7.36.1-7)

But Christians today so often forsake this, or think it a very little thing, not worthy of much attention, let alone their best attention. Some are known in some circles as “C&E” Christians, for they only go to services on Christmas and Easter. But even in places where once all Christians gathered every week and it was a public shame to miss, this has degenerated into so much confusion and devastation caused by neglecting a law given to keep men happy and satisfied in their God.

There are many applications. From outwardly being absent or late for trivial reasons, to the repaganizing of the West because God's people despise sabbath, to the lack of knowledge among God's people of right and wrong, to the lack of knowing how to enjoy God, to inwardly attending somewhere else in their brain even when they come, to coming to church in anger or with a bad attitude thereby

profaning the Sabbath, there is plenty enough law-breaking for all of us to go around.

Then there is the mixed marriages thing. Again, **there is continuity** here. The Apostle tells us to marry “**in the Lord**” (1Co 7:39) and not to be “**unequally yoked with unbelievers**” (2Co 6:14). Many Christians do not pay attention to this even slightly, and marry for almost any reason other than religious compatibility in the Lord. Again, we need to realize that **not everyone sees the application** of these rules exactly the same. Some think “in the Lord” means you have to marry someone who believes exactly like you do on every doctrine, which makes for mighty slim pickins’, especially when you are the only one who believes exactly like you do. This is just like Sabbath observance which can easily become legalistic, whether you are Jewish or Reformed.

But at the same time, it seems to me that many have **the opposite problem**. And it starts even before dating. Eyeing someone who isn’t a Christian. Dating someone you know is bad news, but not caring because emotions get in the way of reason. Not thinking ahead about marriages, but only in the “now” about whoever you are with. Not teaching your

children about these things. Marrying for expedience or loneliness or anything but wanting to make a marriage rock solid on your common union with Christ so that you might build up children who come to know the Lord and will take the faith into the next generation. That's the point of all this, you know? And we've seen it in Nehemiah and the Psalms of Ascent.

But it can be worse than even this. Someone here might think themselves above the violation of these two laws. If that's you, then you need to consider what James says. “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (Jas 2:10). This is the lesson of the rich young ruler. “Teacher,” he said to Jesus, “what must I do to have eternal life” (Matt 19:16). Jesus told him to keep the commandments (17-19). “Which ones?” Jesus gave him the last six of the Ten Commandments, those that deal with neighbor.

Incredibly, the man said, “All these I have kept.” This is the person who looks at something like the Sabbath or Intermarrying laws and says, “Hey, I'm good. Haven't broken those.”



So Jesus said, “If you would be perfect...” (21). This is the key. And Jesus says it on more than one occasion. **Perfection**. You have to be perfect, which the young man apparently thought he was, but wasn’t quite sure. So Jesus gave him a law. “See what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (21).

I think Jesus must have had something like **Deuteronomy 15:7-19** in mind. “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and you be guilty of sin.” All Jesus is doing here is taking the heart of this law and combining it with his own loving and sovereign ability to take care of this man’s needs. “I’ll take care of you;

go give everything to the poor, because they need it and you don't."

But the man went away sad, because he was very wealthy (22). In other words, Jesus found that law where sin had taken hold of that man's heart and he was unable to let it go. In other words, he wasn't perfect. And neither are you. But that is what God's law demands. Nehemiah isn't divvying out eternal life. He is reforming a nation. But in doing so, this example was to be a lesson learned to each individual Jew, that God cares profoundly about all of his laws, and that his people be separate from the world he has called them to still live in.

I hope it would be [the sadness of the rich man](#) that would strike you today, and not his aloofness to his own sinful condition, which certainly came out against Nehemiah in the form of anger and resentment and feelings of retribution from those he was correcting among the leadership. If it is the former for you and not the latter, then you are ready to hear our songs. If not, why not?

## Psalms of Confession and Hope

**Psalm 130** is the parallel of the Sabbath story. It begins as usual with “**A Song of Ascents.**” Its message is very fitting for anyone who has **been struck by the weight of their own sin.** “**Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy**” (2). With the *ascending* of the song that we have seen so many times, what is **the repeating idea** here? It isn’t “Lord.” Rather, there are two different words for God here: Yahweh (LORD) and Adonai (Lord). This is as it was in **Psalm 110:1** where the first refers to the Father and the second refers to the Son. The Trinity continues to be in the Scripture.

The repetition is “**voice.**” This voice is saying something. It is **crying** out. Something is wrong. But that something is on the inside. He needs **mercy.**

“**If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?**” (3). Again, Yahweh and Adonai. If the Father kept score of sins, who could stand before the Judgment seat of Christ? This verse is at once a lesson that thinking so long as your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds you will be

justified by God for your salvation is folly and good news for anyone who keeps track of their own sins and therefore worries that God will hold them against him though he is a Christian. **God is not up there keeping score** of your sins, beloved. That is not the kind of God he is.

This does not mean he doesn't know what you've done or hate the sin. But the reason this is said is because there is **a remedy**. The remedy is not to do whatever you want, because God isn't watching. The remedy is “**With you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared**” (4). **Forgiveness?** For running roughshod over everything that is holy and good in this world? Forgiveness for mocking God and his righteousness each time you sin? Forgiveness for breaking sabbath, despising Christian union, and neglecting the next generation? Yes.

What kind of a God would do this? **A very kind God**. But also, a very powerful one. So powerful that he has found a way to forgive you without justice being compromised. And that's the whole reason Jesus came, obeyed the law, and died on a cross. The fear of God in the Bible, the godly fear, is not generated from terror of him, but from **awe of his ways that he would do such good things** that we have such

a hard time even beginning to do, yet do them perfectly, completely, finally.

But this **takes faith**. Faith in Christ, which the Psalmist himself has, as we have seen. He trusts that the Father does not keep score. He trusts that he will stand on the day of judgment. As Job says, “If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, and he is merciful to him, and says, ‘Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom; let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor’” (Job 33:23-25).

In the song, the **faith comes in patiently waiting**. “I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in this Word I hope” (5). Now Yahweh parallels Word. Do you hear Christ the Word here? One can only wait upon the Lord and hope in the Word if one has faith in him. Again, “My soul waits for the Lord (Adonai) more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning” (6). A watchman waited because the night was long and usually nothing exciting happened. He couldn’t wait to be done with his night watch. Likewise, our souls long for the day when God will finally rid of all remaining sin.

The end of the song turns outward. The personal faith of the Psalmist now becomes a prayer for all the people, that they would come to have faith and repent as well. “O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption” (7). Now, Yahweh is paralleled with Yahweh! This is because the Son is Yahweh and the Father is Yahweh. This is common throughout the OT. But it is important to see this, because it is through the steadfast love and redemption of the Son that your hope in the Father is made sure.

And what will God do? “He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities” (8). Do you hear how the deep woe at the beginning becomes great hope at the end? Why? Because of faith and repentance and trust in God’s forgiveness and redemption. Now that is something to sing about, and surely it fits with the great sin of sabbath breaking that the people were committing. As someone said about this, “By flagrant defiance of the divine Law, the community deserves, and invites, further retribution: its only hope is that God will spare them in his mercy.”<sup>8</sup> The psalms says he

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<sup>8</sup> Goulder, 81.

will, and this is a direct answer to Nehemiah's prayer. Praise the LORD.

The second song builds upon this forgiveness theme and truly helps the Christian see the joy found in the LORD. "It is a Song of Ascents. Of David." David knew a thing or two about forgiveness. "O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things to great and marvelous for me" (1). The point here is that he is not a proud man who thinks he knows everything. He is not seeking high honors. He has no intention to interfere in the temple religion. And so on. Rather, he is humble and only wants God to be glorified.

"But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me" (2). Previously, he was waiting anxiously for the LORD like a watchman in the night. Now, the LORD has answered him, and he is satisfied and quieted within like a newly fed infant. This is what repenting of sin and knowing the forgiveness of God in Christ does to a person. It is why we sabbath! It is why we marry in the Lord. It is why we prepare the next generation of infants.

Again, the song turns outward, as it leads by example. “O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore” (3). It is basically the same idea that ended the last song, which fits such similar situations in Nehemiah. In fact, as Goulder points out, the image is one of moving from an angry baby to one who is pacified is not easy to find a counterpart in a biblical story. “How fortunate we are to have them all implied in Neh 13:23-29.”<sup>9</sup> And how fortunate we are to have God’s word teach us through such examples as these that there is forgiveness to be found in Christ’s sacrifice and the loving arms that he stretched out for us on the cross.

Beloved, God has saved you from the catastrophe of his sin. And so,

May you hope in the LORD from this time forth and forever.

O church, hope in the LORD!

May these wishes of the Psalm be for all God’s people and for those who hear who have not yet come to faith.

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<sup>9</sup> Goulder, 89.