



Time to Reflect

- How can we ensure that our ‘fires of devotion’ will continue to burn brightly in our daily lives?
- Is there anything in our lives that is out of order? What needs to change to help us become who God really wants us to be?

Last week we focused on the theme of giving and we saw how the Israelite community sought to support and resource the spiritual leaders of the nation. We reflected on how we offer our gifts to God with joy and thanksgiving. This week, as we enter the final chapter of Nehemiah, we are reminded of the significance of people problems and we are challenged to live out our faith without condition or compromise.

“No matter how much a leader completes and accomplishes, managing difficult people is tough. The ending to the book of Nehemiah is filled with that reality.”

Eric Mason, *Nehemiah For You*, p149.

Specifics

- It has been encouraging to see how the Israelites engaged in worship and offered their praise and gifts to God (Nehemiah 12). However, as we enter this final chapter of the book of Nehemiah, it is clear that there was a significant change of direction.
- (v6) tells us that Nehemiah had returned to King Artaxerxes and he was gone for about a year. During this time the situation had deteriorated quite dramatically and the Israelites, who had previously shown such promise and faithfulness, were not living up to the vows that they had made.
- Warren Wiersbe reflects that when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he “...discovered that the fires of devotion had gone out...¹” This is always such a heart-breaking situation.
- This shows us, firstly, that the rate of spiritual development in Jerusalem was strongly linked to the leadership of Nehemiah. The people were not in a position to continue to develop without his oversight.
- Wiersbe speaks into this situation as he observes, “Without spiritual leadership, God’s people are prone to stray like sheep...Moses was away from the people only a short time, and they became idolaters (Ex.32). Paul would establish a church and leave it in the hands of the elders, only to have trouble begin soon after his departure.”²
- Nehemiah was away from Jerusalem only a short time and when he returned, he discovered that the people were defiled by compromise.
- The situation that developed in Jerusalem also reveals the impact of external influences. It’s interesting that (v1) sets the context of what follows in the remainder of the passage. The Moabites and Ammonites are specifically mentioned and they were peoples who had a long history of opposing the Israelites.

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined: Nehemiah* (David. C. Cook, 1992), p155.

² Ibid, p155.

- An example of this opposition is highlighted in (v2) as we read about Balaam. He was hired by the Moabites to call down a curse upon the Israelites but this plan did not succeed.
- Later in our passage (v23), we discover that the Israelites had been intermarrying with the Ammonites and Moabites. This violated the separation promise that the Israelites had made to God (10:30).
- What we see here is not racial exclusivism or ethnical segregation. This is all about the pursuit of purity and radical obedience to God and His Word.
- Those who fundamentally opposed God were not permitted to be part of the assembly of God's people. Eric Mason reflects, "God is always most concerned about spiritual influence. He wanted his people to have families and a legacy that passed on kingdom commitment and ethics."³
- Our passage also identifies another reason for the spiritual regress that occurred in Jerusalem. (v4-5) call our attention to Eliashib and Tobiah. Not only were the Israelites marrying the Ammonites and Moabites, but an Ammonite was also living in the temple!
- Tobiah the Ammonite (4:3) had been given a room in the temple by Eliashib the priest (v5). This should not have happened and it actually defiled the temple and robbed the people of God.
- Tobiah was a key person in the opposition to Nehemiah's reforms. Nevertheless, Eliashib gave him a foothold at the heart of the Israelite community. Mason powerfully concludes, "They had taken the dwelling of God and turned it into a dwelling of divisiveness."⁴
- When we reflect on what actually occurred, we observe how faithfulness to God was replaced by human schemes. This can occur so easily in communities of faith and even our own lives.
- Mason offers a practical observation as he writes, "If I am spending too much time on something that is not what God wants me to spend time on, I have got a Tobiah in my life. Tobiah is a leech. When a Tobiah is in your life, you're always trying to make him feel comfortable...Reading about Tobiah should prompt us to ask ourselves: what things in my life are out of order?"⁵
- Note how Nehemiah reacted to this spiritual regression when he returned to Jerusalem. He was greatly displeased and took immediate action (v7-9). The issues were not ignored or tolerated. Radical obedience was modelled and purity was pursued. We read about purification in (v9 and v30).
- Mason suggests, "When we see a gap between where God wants things and where things are, it is not a time to be polite...We must remove anything that has disrupted God's divine order. Remove it today. There's no mission of God that can go forward until that happens."⁶
- Tobiah was removed from the temple (v8) and the rooms were purified (v9). Nehemiah also rebuked those who had broken their separation promise (v25) and made them take a new oath to God. He also called their attention to the dangers of disobeying God by using the example of Solomon (v26).
- Nehemiah was not scared to act. He removed those who were in opposition to the ways of God (v28) and he turned to God in prayer (v29). As he did so, Nehemiah demonstrated radical obedience and faithful leadership.
- The spiritual regression was not accepted nor was it ignored. As he did so many times before, Nehemiah sought to honour God and put Him first.
- Once more, he provides us with such a profound example of what commitment to God must look like. May we be challenged and encouraged by his faithfulness and obedience.

³ Eric Mason, *Nehemiah For You* (The Good Book Company, 2022), p151.

⁴ Ibid, p153.

⁵ Ibid, p153.

⁶ Ibid, p154.