

The Reform of Nehemiah¹

Nehemiah 13:1-18

INTRODUCTION:

1. Ezra and Nehemiah needed each other.
 - a. Ezra could not have commanded a military force, and he did not have far-ranging authority.
 - b. Nehemiah lacked Ezra's knowledge and could not officiate at feasts and offer sacrifices.
2. When Nehemiah first requested that Artaxerxes send him to Jerusalem, the Persian emperor asked him to set a time for his return.
 - a. Nehemiah asked for a leave of twelve years (5:14).
 - b. When the appointed time was over, he returned to Susa for a year or so before he gained permission to go back to Jerusalem.
3. After his return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah set in order much needed reform.

DISCUSSION:

I. Learning the Law (vv. 1-3)

- A. The public reading of "the book of the Law of Moses" that had begun in 8:1 apparently became a part of daily life in the city.
- B. As they read, the scribes and priests implemented the provisions of the Law.
- C. The reformers were likely sensitive to what the Law said about Ammonites and Moabites for two reasons:
 1. The foreign women whom the exiles had married included Ammonites and Moabites (Ezra 9:1, 2).
 2. Tobiah the Ammonite had been a leader in the resistance to the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (Neh. 4:3).
- D. Ammonites and Moabites were related to Israel, but neither had shown any mercy or kindness to the weary travelers during the wilderness wanderings; therefore, none would be welcomed into the communities of Israel to the tenth generation (Deut. 23:3-5).
- E. The Moabites and their king, Balak, hired Balaam from Mesopotamia to curse Israel (Num. 22:5, 6). When that failed, Balaam counseled the Moabites on ways to entice Israel into sin (Num. 25:1, 2; 31:16).
- F. When the Jews heard that portion of the Law that forbade them to receive Ammonites and Moabites, they forced them to leave.

II. Cleaning the Courts (vv. 4-9)

- A. In Nehemiah's absence, Eliashib (not the high priest, cf. 3:1, 20; 13:4), who was related to Tobiah the Ammonite, made Tobiah comfortable in the temple area.

¹ Chad Ramsey, *Companion 2011-2012* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 2011), pp. 242-246. Adapted by Andy Kizer.

- B. When Nehemiah learned of the arrangement between Eliashib and Tobiah, he was infuriated.
 - 1. He “threw all of the household furniture out of the chamber” (v. 8).
 - 2. He then had the rooms cleaned and returned them to their original purpose, the storing of grain and frankincense for use in the temple service (v. 9).
- C. There is a time to deal with a matter privately (cf. Acts 18:24-26), but there also comes a time when one must act openly (Acts 13:8-12). The challenge is to know the difference between the two.

III. Restoring the Levites (vv. 10-13)

- A. Before returning to Susa, Nehemiah made arrangements for the provisions for the Levites (cf. Num. 3:6, 7).
- B. The Levites had helped with purification rituals.
- C. They served as singers and gatekeepers as David and Solomon had assigned them (Neh. 12:45-47).
- D. Upon his return, Nehemiah found that the Levites had been neglected, and the temple service, too, had been neglected.
- E. Nehemiah quickly rectified matters.

IV. Respecting the Sabbath (vv. 14-18)

- A. Among the abuses Nehemiah found upon his return was the desecration of the Sabbath (cf. 10:31).
- B. Merchants were selling food supplies and goods of various sorts on the Sabbath as if there were no significance to the day.
- C. When Nehemiah stepped forward to insist on obedience to the Law of God, he prayed (13:22).
- D. The governor took matters directly in hand.
 - 1. He went first to Jewish merchants and required that they respect the Sabbath.
 - 2. After that he went to the leading men of the city and reprimanded them for failing to enforce the Law concerning the Sabbath (cf. Ex. 20:10).
 - 3. He commanded that the gates of the city be closed and not be reopened until sundown on the Sabbath (v. 19).
 - 4. When merchants gathered outside the walls to conduct business on the Sabbath as usual, Nehemiah gave them a stern warning.

CONCLUSION:

- 1. Although Nehemiah was perhaps one of the most capable leaders in Scripture, his one glaring weakness was his failure to develop someone to lead in his absence.
- 2. Nehemiah’s decisive action with regard to Tobiah reminds us that there is a time address impropriety.
- 3. When the people were convinced that God’s plan was being violated, they were willing to correct the wrongdoing. As much as congregations today need godly leaders, they also need men and woman who are willing to be submissive (cf. Heb. 13:17).