

Message for July 3rd, 2016, [Slide 1a] title, “Living in the Shadow Lands, [1b] text, Nehemiah 13:1-31 [1c]

Today concludes our study of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, a single book in the Hebrew scriptures. [slide 2a] **Nehemiah II and I2** recount the repopulating of the city of Jerusalem and the dedication of the wall around it. This surely was the highpoint for Nehemiah’s efforts at reforming the nation, the moment when he could see the successful conclusion of his service to the Lord in restoring the well-being of the Covenant people of God. [2b] The precedent for the dedication of the wall was Solomon’s dedication of the temple, a celebration of far greater magnitude but not necessarily of greater significance for those immediately involved. [2c and slide 3a] Whenever I read the description in **Nehemiah 12:27-43** of the two choirs marching in opposite directions along the top of the wall, I think of [3b] (**2 Chronicles 20**) with the armies of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah marching out not to defeat the armies of the three nations which were coming to wage war, but to witness the Lord’s victory over them. Jehoshaphat and the people had no idea how the Lord was going to do this. In faith Jehoshaphat sent a great choir to lead the army and to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy attire, saying, “*Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever.*” So they sang and marched and the three invading armies fell to waging war with each other and they all died before the Israelites arrived at the scene: perhaps we have a spiritual principle: [3c] worship first, fight only if necessary! [3d]

What a grand thing it must have been to be in one of those companies marching along the wall, one led by the old priest Ezra and the other by Nehemiah, looking out over the surrounding countryside on one side or on the other side over the city within being rebuilt and knowing all this was the handiwork of God. Nehemiah concludes the account of the dedication by saying [slide 4a] (**Nehemiah 12:40-43**),

“So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me; and the priests Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader. And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.”

Nehemiah rounds out his account of the golden moment in [4b] verses **44-47**,

“On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the Law for the priests and for the Levites according to the fields of the towns, for Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered. And they performed the service of their God and the service of

purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon. For long ago in the days of David and Asaph there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers; and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron.

This for the dedicated Jew was [4c] the way things were supposed to be. Nehemiah surely wrote those verses with a deep sense of gratitude to the Lord. [4c]

In the thirteenth chapter we learn that about this time Nehemiah returns to Babylon (Neh. 13:6), *“While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king.”* Though nothing is said on the matter, it is likely Nehemiah’s own family, and certainly his extended family and many friends, both Jewish and Babylonian, were still living in Babylon. There is no clear indication of how long he was gone, but it was long enough, perhaps it was too long. In the opening section of chapter 13 Nehemiah records [slide 5a] a further reform, this one undertaken spontaneously by the people, before Nehemiah left Jerusalem. As they had under the prompting of Ezra, the people heard the instruction of the Law regarding the need to be separated from the people of the land especially in their marriages, and so [5b] they undertook to purify the families of the covenant people once again (Neh. 13:1-3)

“On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—but God turned the curse into a blessing. As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.”

Few things more clearly differentiate the Old Testament dispensation of God’s grace from the New than this application of the principle of separation. [5c] We rightly recoil at the notion that by an accident of birth a person or a whole people can be excluded from the salvation of God. Let us rejoice in God’s goodness to us that we live under the sign of the cross which includes every people, nation and tribe rather than the burden of the Law which excludes all but the Jews. [5d] (Galatians 3:28), *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* [5e]

The thirteenth chapter of Nehemiah, however, does not close with high praise and thanksgiving. [slide 6a] In a sense the whole history of the Jewish people and the Old Covenant are recapitulated in this single chapter. For having experienced a glorious renewal under a godly leader, the Jews promptly fall away when the leader is gone. As one of the commentators said, it appears we have here, [6b] “A painful illustration of the superficiality of reforms wrought hastily under the influence of powerful leaders.” (The Pulpit Commentary, vol. 7, p. 145) [6c] From what

Nehemiah writes it appears that even before he left town the trouble began. A priest named Eliashib, later identified as the high priest – see v. 26 – used his position in the temple to provide highly privileged living quarters to Tobiah, a foreigner and one of the arch-enemies of the returned exiles as well. This was [slide 7a] betrayal at the very heart of the renewed nation. But the [7b] failure was widespread (Nehemiah 13:10), *“I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field.”* Nehemiah took corrective action, challenging the officials in charge, v. 11, *“So I confronted the officials and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken?’* It has often been observed that [7c] nature hates a vacuum. Whether or not that is true in the physical world, it certainly is in the social and emotional world of human beings. We will fill empty hours with something to do and empty hearts with something to worship. [7d] In the absence of worship in the temple, the people turned and worshiped other things: (Nehemiah 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, gifs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day.”* [7e and slide 8a] Is it wrong to say that they took to serving mammon, the god of material wealth, instead of the Lord God, the God of righteousness and truth? [8b] Again Nehemiah takes corrective action. He [slide 9a] restores the Sabbath as the balance point for the rhythm of a life focused on and built around the worship of God. [9b] When our affections are no longer disciplined by our love for God, they will go elsewhere, for the heart hungers for emotional gratification and relational closeness.

[9c and slide 10a] (Nehemiah 13:23-24), *In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 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.*” Again Nehemiah takes corrective action, pointing out that it was Solomon’s foreign wives who had led him into idolatry and brought great grief to Israel. Again [10b] we recoil at the thought of breaking marriages for the principle of separation. If, however, we read I Corinthians 7, we will find that the principle of separation is still active under the New Covenant even if in a modified form. [10c] (I Cor. 7:12-16),

“...if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”

Clearly the emphasis and the hope here is all on the side of extending the kingdom of God's grace into the lives of those who do not yet believe. But just as clearly we see [I0d] there is a distinction between those who do and who do not believe.

[I0e and slide 11a] The principle of separation comes out most clearly in Paul's closing instruction (I Corinthians 7:39), "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." Separation [I1b] as a principle of separation applies more specifically to the life of the Christian community. John states this forcefully in 2 John 6-11,

"And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works."

In our day we are deeply confused regarding Christian love. Somehow [I1c] people assume that if we love, really love, then we will love everyone in the same way, but [I1d] this is not true. [I1e] It is, in fact, foolish, for it acts contrary to the truth. [slide 12a] To love someone is [I2b] to seek to know and to do what is best for them. To love someone is [I2c] to respect them as made in the image and likeness of God; it is [I2d] to treat them as capable of knowing, believing and doing the truth. [I2e and slide 13a] But it does not pretend or act as if they have already embraced the truth if they haven't. Love does not ignore the fact if some rejects, resents, distorts or misrepresents the truth. *"And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world..."*

As [I3b] an illustration of living by the truth, Nehemiah's comment to the Jews regarding marriage needs to be heard (Nehemiah 13:26), *"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."* [I3c] Can there be a stronger warning against the idea that we can expect marriage to be, as it were, a means of grace by which the believer is going to bring the unbeliever to faith? Of course it can happen: that is what Paul indicates when telling the believing spouse or partner not to seek a divorce. But neither here nor anywhere else does Paul give assurance that it will. [I3d and slide 4a] To marry in defiance of such instruction is to presume on the grace of the Lord. [I4b]

Finally, Nehemiah cites the particular case of the grandson of Eliashib the high priest who had become the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, words we read almost with disbelief. Nehemiah tells us (**Neh. 13:28**), *“I chased him from me.”* We can well believe it. Earlier he said that in response to the marriage to foreign wives (**Neh. 13:25**), *“...I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair.”* At some point the patience of even the best of men will reach its limit!

These are [**slide I5a**] Nehemiah’s last words (30-31):

“Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.”

Although the books of Ezra and Nehemiah offer instruction in many aspects of the life of faith, I think it is fair to say that [**I5b**] a major theme in each book is the nature of spiritually effective leadership. That is what I have emphasized as we have studied these ancient writings. Zerubbabel of the line of David and Jeshua the high priest led the first return by the exiles and the initial effort to rebuild the altar and temple, but they did not have sufficient strength to complete the project. Completing the project required the intervention of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and, most importantly, the work of Ezra who came from Babylon with the intention of re-grounding the Covenant People in the Torah, the word of God. [**I5c and slide I6a**] Ezra knew that for Israel to actually survive as the called people of God, an altar and temple were not enough. What was needed was the [**I6b**] creation of a way of life centered on the temple and altar, devoted to God and living according to the rhythm of daily, weekly, monthly and yearly worship. The Lord is less interested in rituals of sacrifice than He is in lives of faith and obedience to His commands. [**I6c**] Acts of worship by lives without moral character or content are empty acts: they are a stench to God, not an aroma of sweet savoring. But Ezra did not succeed, for the city of Jerusalem remained essentially an abandoned city without walls or gates. In that age for people to maintain a way of life they needed defensive walls and gates if they were to preserve their integrity as a people. [**I6d**]

Nehemiah returned to Israel to rebuild the walls of the city. But [**slide I7a**] Nehemiah also knew that it is people and not structures, even so impressive a structure as the wall and its gates, that were needed to both establish and defend a way of life. So after completing the wall, Nehemiah went on to repopulate the city. In this he succeeded; but for Nehemiah failure was his portion as well. Both Ezra and Nehemiah saw the importance of purity amongst the people of God, especially in their marriages, and both took the drastic step of breaking the marriages Israelites had made with foreign women. But [**I7b**] the reforms accomplished by both of these godly men proved to be only temporary. It is surely significant that whereas a great celebration was held for dedicating the wall, [**I7c**] we hear of no celebration thanking Nehemiah for his labors. It appears rather that [**I7d**]

and slide I8a] at the end of the day, Nehemiah is once again alone with his God in prayer, and he asks the Lord to remember him for good. With that the divine record is silent.

Beloved, this is thematically correct. Through the book of Nehemiah, we have had repeated occasions to see that Nehemiah found his strength and his personal inner balance in the face of great challenges from both external enemies and internal weakness, corruption and even betrayal by seeking God in prayer. **[I8b]** Spiritual leadership is first and foremost and above all other things a walk of faith with God. Some would say that it is a lonely calling, and in some sense it is. But **[I8c]** God is a good and close companion to those who turn to Him in prayer and trust Him for the journey.