

## **February Teaching Theme:** The Book of Nehemiah

讲员 Speaker: Pastor William R. Horne / Pastor Peter Linghui Tian

题目 Topic: “When it All Falls Down” / 不徇私情、堵住破口

经文 Scripture: Nehemiah 13

**Monthly Theme:** As we enter a new year, we will spend some time walking through the book of Nehemiah over the next nine weeks. Although Nehemiah is its own book in our English Bibles, the whole book is actually Ezra-Nehemiah together. So as we approach Nehemiah, we have to keep in mind that we are coming into the story 3/4th of the way through. If we go back to the beginning of the story in Ezra, we are told that God moved King Cyrus' heart to let the Israelites return to their land to fulfill the prophecy spoken by Jeremiah (Ezra 1). The hope that exile will not be forever should trigger the reader to pick up all the other prophetic hopes of return, including hope for the Messianic King, God's presence in the Temple, and God's Kingdom to be established. We must keep these hopes in mind as we read to the story to properly understand both the ups and downs. Most characters in the Biblical narrative, including Nehemiah, are deeply flawed individuals who have a mix of successes and failures - just like you and me. And this mix of success and failure we will keep confronting as we move through the story of Nehemiah. Let's see what we can learn from Nehemiah's story.

### 二月 **February:** 尼希米記 **Nehemiah**

February 6th - 尼希米記: 與神立約 The Covenant (尼希米記七至八章 Nehemiah 7-8)

February 13th - 尼希米記: 認承罪孽 The Confession (尼希米記九章 Nehemiah 9)

February 20th - 尼希米記: 落成典禮 The Dedication (尼希米記十至十二章 Nehemiah 10-12)

February 27th - 尼希米記: 功敗垂成 The Failure (尼希米記十三章 Nehemiah 13) (聖容主日 Transfiguration Sunday)

*Coming soon to a sermon near you...The Book of Malachi*

### **Resources:**

[Sermon Video](#) (Pastor Will)

[Sermon Slides](#) (Pastor Will)

[Sermon Video](#) (Pastor Tian)

[Sermon Slides](#) (Pastor Tian)

[Overview: Ezra-Nehemiah \(Bible Project\)](#) [English]

[Overview: Ezra-Nehemiah \(Bible Project\)](#) [Mandarin]

\* If your group hasn't watched the overview video yet, please do so.\*

### **Discussion Questions** (Pastor William R. Horne):

*Pastor Will:*

**Primary Claim:** We can only be truly transformed by the work and grace of God. We must choose to lean into God's transforming work, not our own power. When it all falls down - God will still be there.

- (1) Read Nehemiah 13 together. What observations do you make, and what stands out to you? How would you summarize the passage?
- (2) What ways are we tempted to NOT heed these warnings found in Nehemiah 13, and what practices can we take up to not fall to such temptations.

*Warning 1:* When you read Scripture without the full Biblical story, you will likely misapply the text. (Neh 13:1-3)

*Warning 2:* When you are overly confident that you are right, you are likely to miss the heart of God. (Neh 13:1-9, 14)

*Warning 3:* When your priority is profit, you will likely neglect the things of God, forfeit the needs of others, and lose yourself. (Neh 13:10-22)

*Warning 4:* When you use Scripture to exclude others, you will likely abuse others. (Neh 13:23-31)

- (3) The Story of Nehemiah is a story about the human condition, points us to the heart of the Gospel. Leaders cannot transform hearts and minds, only God can bring about our transformation. Christianity isn't a "self-help" religion, it is a life of trust in the God who can transform us. Read Ezekiel 36:25-29 and Jeremiah 31:33-34. What observations do you make? How is God depicted in these passages? How does this help us understand the heart of the Gospel?

*Pastor Tian:*

- (1) 对比尼希米离开耶路撒冷之前和之后百姓的信仰和生活，有哪些不同？为什么会出现这么大的变化？这对今天的信仰生活有哪些提醒？What is the difference between the beliefs and life of the people before and after Nehemiah left Jerusalem? Why is there such a big change? What reminders does this have for our faith life today?
- (2) 当尼希米再次回到耶路撒冷之后，他是如何面对和处理所看到的事情？如果你是当时的尼希米，将会如何处理这些事情？When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem again, how did he face and deal with what he saw? If you were Nehemiah back then, how would you handle these things?
- (3) 透过阅读/学习尼13章，你将会在信仰和生活的哪些方面做出改变？By reading/studying Ni 13, what aspects of your faith and life will you make?

**Important Notes** (Pastor William R. Horne):

Notes on Q1: As you read through this chapter, make sure you recall the context from both the [Monthly Theme](#) section and the [Bible Project video](#). Context is key to understanding the movements of the story.

**\*\*Note:** You may notice that Pastor Tian and I preached this text from two different angles and that is okay. It is also something we together agree to do ahead of time, knowing that giving the congregation two different angles on the text can be beneficial for our growth. That is the beauty of books like Nehemiah where so much is left unclear and up for debate, we can draw numerous potential principles and applications from the text. As Cell Group Leaders, feel free to use the questions to discuss one of the two angles or (even better) frame discussion around both the positives and negatives we can take from Nehemiah. If you have any questions feel free to reach out.\*\*

## Notes on Q2:

**Warning 1:** In Nehemiah 13:1-3, we find the community of God's people reading Deuteronomy 23:3-6 and trying to apply it. When this passage is read by itself, we could understand some of the community's failed attempts to apply the text. However, notice first the jump that the people make from the text to the application. The people jump from a passage about "Ammonites and Moabites" to "excluding ALL who were of foreign descent." That is a jump further than the text itself warrants. But, beyond this, as we examine the whole of Scripture, and much of the Biblical narrative possibly available to Nehemiah - we find a different story.

One way the Bible helps us see its messages is how the characters change, how the story develops. Does the story end positively or with approval from God or do their actions have negative results? How does the story fit within the rest of the framework of Scripture? Nehemiah 13 is filled with a lot of negative and God's voice of approval is not found anywhere in the book. There is a truth to take from the text the people read from Deuteronomy - that we should not adopt the ungodly practice of our neighbors, but full out exclusion is not the heart of God. The story that should immediately come to our minds is from the book of Ruth, some 800-900 years earlier in Israel's history. If you recall the story - in the time of the judges, when everyone did whatever they wanted and there was no king in Israel - The Moabite Ruth and the half Canaanite half Israelite farmer Boaz bring about the line of King David. So God brought about the greatest, most renowned King in all of Israel's history through Moabite, Canaanite, and Israelite descendants. (And as we know, eventually the Messiah King Jesus). So is it true that no Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God? Not quite. Or to think about other significant "foreigners" or non-Israelites in the history of God's people we can look to Moses whose wife Zipporah is a Midianite. Or what about Joseph's two sons we read about at the end of Genesis - Manasseh and Ephraim. They are half Egyptian and half Israelite - and yet, Manasseh and Ephraim become one of the twelve tribes of Israel. There is no tribe of Joseph, but the tribes Manasseh and Ephraim.

As you can see, God has always been working to include and bring about salvation for all the nations - even at the very beginning formations of the people of God. It's also clear from the prophets that God had another plan. Look at passages like Isaiah 56:3-8, where God proclaims, his house will be "a house of prayer for all nations," and when he gathers the exiles of Israel, he "will gather still others to them besides those already gathered," with direct reference to "foreigners." In the story of Nehemiah - the LORD God is gathering the exiles of Israel - yet, the people refuse to allow the LORD to gather "still others" who are not Israelite, as the prophet Isaiah tells us.

**Warning 2:** This warning is closely related to the first warning - but takes us beyond simply how we read Scripture to our postures and attitude in all of life. After we read about the incident with Tobiah living in the temple and Nehemiah's throwing him out, we encounter this prayer in Nehemiah 13:14, "Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services." Now, this prayer is not necessarily wrong. But, Nehemiah is so confident that what he has done is right, not just in the Tobiah situations but in everything. His posture is that without a shadow of a doubt - what I have done and am doing is pleasing to you God. His thoughts about the foreigners, the way he handles the Tobiah situation,

the way he treats the people later on in an attempt to correct them. He is absolutely confident that his method is right. And maybe it was, but by the trajectory of the chapter, we know there is more to the story. What would it have looked like for Nehemiah to approach this prayer differently? What would it look like for him to approach God with humility and openness that he could be wrong? This has been a challenge for the people of God throughout history - the challenge to stay open to what God is doing as opposed to assuming what we are doing is what God wants.

What immediately comes to mind is the story of the people of God we find in Acts 15 (feel free to go read the chapter, if you'd like). In the book of Acts, God guides the church on a path from being a Jewish community to a multi-ethnic, international movement. And as the people of God are taken on this adventure, they are challenged to take a posture of humility and open themselves up to the new thing God is doing. After Paul's first missionary journey, Paul discovers that there are some Jewish Christians claiming that unless non-Jewish Christ-followers become Jewish by practicing circumcision, kosher food laws, the Sabbath, and the like, then they are not saved. They cannot join the people of God. Paul and Barnabas however strongly disagree and take the matter back to a larger church council in Jerusalem. And in this council including people like Peter, James, and other early church leaders - they show through both the Scriptures and their experience that God's plan was ALWAYS to include non-Jews in his people. And this discovery, found in an openness to what God was doing in Jesus the Messiah, leads the council to send a letter to the churches that new Gentile followers should stop any pagan sacrifices but they don't need to adopt a Jewish ethnic, cultural, or religious identity to follow Jesus. This decision is groundbreaking and changes the whole trajectory of what we now know as the Church. It is the reason we can even gather together here today and follow Jesus in our time, cultures, and context. Jesus is not only the Jewish Messiah, but he is also King over the whole world - thus membership in the family of God is not based on ethnicity or following the laws of the Torah, but simply by choosing to give your trust and allegiance to King Jesus. This groundbreaking decision only happened because the early church took a posture of openness to what God was doing and had done in history. Their choosing to not be overly-confident that how they thought before was the right way, kept them from missing the heart of God. So, what if Nehemiah prayed differently in this season? What if he was open to being wrong? How would things have changed in Nehemiah 13? Maybe things could have been different.

**Warning 3:** As we read through chapter 13 of the story, we notice the sinful priorities of Nehemiah 5 popping back up. The people put financial profits as the first priority. First, we see the Levites being neglected in Nehemiah 13:10 where it says, "I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields." If you recall, the tribe of Levi was the tribe responsible for fulfilling religious duties for the people of Israel. The priest and Levites were similar in many ways to clergy in our modern time. They were professional religious workers who were supported full-time for their work. This is why the tribe of Levi is not given tribal land when the promise land was divided up, but they were to be supported by the tithes given to the temple. Here in Nehemiah 13, the Levites were not being given their portion of the tithes, thus they were forced to go work the land to survive. Where the money was going we are not told, but it wasn't being properly used to support the Levites' work as clergy.

Then as we continue the story, we find out that the people were breaking the Sabbath laws by working and selling on that day, instead of resting as God commanded. This practice was so bad, that even when Nehemiah shut the gate to keep people from moving merchandise in the city to sell on the Sabbath, that people decided to just set up their marketplaces on the outside of the wall, to continue making a profit. The people didn't trust God, they trusted their hustle. They prioritized business and work success over everything else. And in the end, their neglecting the Sabbath not only dishonored God but was a choice to lose themselves. When we do not trust God enough to embrace the rest he has designed us for, we end up losing ourselves in the work, the grind, the busyness of life. The Sabbath is an invitation to trust God, embrace our human limitations, and find life in the stillness.

**Warning 4:** The issue of intermarriage with non-Israelites comes up once again in this story. Dr. Moon last week rightly spoke to the heart of the laws in the Torah that were concerned with the worship of other gods. That is a real concern. And certainly, this principle can apply to how we approach engagement and marriage today - that one should marry a fellow Jesus-follower. It is hard to follow after Jesus if the person you are to be "one flesh" with is not doing the same. But, let's say you are married and you later turn to follow Jesus and your spouse does not? Should you get divorced? No, certainly not! Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 7, that this is not the path. Paul tells us that God's grace is sufficient in this situation and God can work towards salvation and sanctification for the unbelieving spouse through the believing one. Ezra made this mistake earlier, thinking divorce was the answer in the story in the book of Ezra, when he and the leaders made a divorce decree splitting up families - this was never the heart of God. (We will also see this reality from the contemporary prophet Malachi in a couple of weeks who says Israel's leaders' divorce decree was wrong.)

Now, also take note of what Nehemiah's concerns are stated here in the text - it is not simply spiritual, but culture Nehemiah's worried about (Look at Nehemiah 13:23-24). His focus is upon their linguistic and cultural differences, not their religious or spiritual differences. In response to the issues of intermarriage of Israelite descendants with non-Israelite descendants, Nehemiah does the following: "I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name..." (Neh 13:25). His use of Scripture to exclude others leads him to abuse others. Maybe, Nehemiah's desires are right. He wants the people to follow after God. He wants to experience God as his ancestors did. But, the way he responds is wrong. And the way he applies the text, I would argue is wrong. I can't help but think of the Apostle Paul's story when I read Nehemiah's response.

Paul was a devote Israelite whose ultimate desire was to see his people follow after God. He wanted to experience God as his ancestors did and bring about revival. So, to do so he choose to persecute and kill Christians for the purity of Isreal. Sure, it was violent - but, the purity of Israel was the priority if Paul wanted to bring about the Kingdom of God - or so he thought. But, then in the midst of his pursuit of the purity of God's people, he encounters the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. And in this encounter - his imagination is transformed, his mind is opened to what God was doing in the paradox of the Crucified Messiah. Paul's ministry changed from coercion, power, and force to humility, love, openness, and weakness. And he is the original Christian mission and the author of a huge portion of our New Testament. See sometimes our desires can be right, but our actions be wrong. And I believe this is what we see

in the closing chapter of Nehemiah - a man who led well in seasons, and his heart was in the right place, but he still missed the mark. And his using Scripture to exclude led him to abuse people - just like the Apostle Paul.