

## Week 9. Nehemiah 13: Incomplete Restoration

So with this week Ezra-Nehemiah comes to an end (sniff!)... and it's pretty miserable!  
The covenant was renewed in chapter 10, the high point was the celebration in chapter 12  
Now we come back to earth with a bump. Why such a downer of an ending?  
Because the book of Ezra-Nehemiah has always been pointing well beyond itself...

*“The Book of Nehemiah seems to peter out in what might be considered a somewhat unsatisfactory manner, not so much with a bang as with a whimper. All the abuses referred to in this final chapter have been the subject of earlier treatment, but they rear their heads again here despite the best efforts of the reformers to eradicate them... It is as though the book is pointing to its own failure, reminding us that however important good structures and routines may be...nothing can substitute for the renewal of the naturally perverse inclinations of the human heart.” (H.G.M Williamson)*

### External Reforms Will Never Fully Solve Our Internal Problems

#### Outline

Nehemiah heads back to Artaxerxes for a period of service

1. v1-3 Overzealous Legalism

The reforms have consistently driven God's people back to God's word  
But this is at least ambiguous; taking things to a legalistic extreme of overreach

- Deut 23:3 excludes Ammonite and Moabite... here they exclude *all* (v3)
- Even Ammonite and Moabite can join God's people if they will turn to God
- Previous Israelite history includes notable exceptions (Ruth!)

2. v 4-14 Indifference to Temple Ministry

The temple is compromised and neglected.  
*First:* Tobiah himself, a pagan enemy of God's people, is given a room in the temple!  
*Second:* Tithes and offerings are neglected so that the temple servants cannot continue  
Temple service is abandoned within 12 years of the promises made in Neh 10:32-39!

3. v 15-22 Apathy towards Sabbath Worship

Sabbath is ignored by those working and allowing non-Israelites in to trade  
The Sabbath was a marker that the people were God's people, and so *free*—not slaves  
Sabbath meant they *could* rest vs forced to work... and perhaps meet with God!  
The Sabbath is abandoned within 12 years of the promises made in Neh 10:31!

4. v16-31 Compromise with Pagan Peoples

Intermarriage again! It's the issue that just won't go away. The people compromise  
The problem arises yet again within 12 years of the promise made in Neh 10:28-30!

## Major Themes

**Covenant failure:** The people unpick every feature of the covenant renewal in chapter 10

**Depth of Reform:** Nehemiah & Ezra have worked tirelessly. How deep has it really gone?  
NB. As soon as Nehemiah has gone, the renewal is undone  
How often is our fidelity actually dependent on external circumstances?

**Ministry Fatigue:** How does Nehemiah come across? He seems grumpy and irritable...

**The Need for Hope:** OT history ends here. Where next? Disappointment leads to hope

*Malachi (probably Nehemiah's contemporary) promises: "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire" says the LORD. Not a root or branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves." (Malachi 4:1-2)*

*"Covenants are solemnly sworn yet easily broken. Where will we find the covenant keeper except in our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ? Ezra-Nehemiah should drum into us a holy distrust of ourselves, give us a clear grasp of how tenuous our devotion is. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love." Isn't it healthy to see that? And if we do, is there not hope?" (Dale Ralph Davies)*

## Suggested Questions

After all the success of Ezra-Nehemiah, how do you respond to this chapter?

*Compare 10:28-39.* What do the problems tell us about the people's hearts before God?

Where do you see the tendency for your outward faithfulness to depend on circumstances?

How do you respond to Nehemiah's actions in this chapter? *Godly zeal or cranky vindictiveness?!*

How does the end of Ezra-Nehemiah leave you thirsting for the coming of the messiah?

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Reflect: What has struck about God and about yourself as we've studied Ezra-Nehemiah?