

Ezra and Nehemiah

Backslidden People

Lesson #11 for December 14, 2019

Scriptures: Nehemiah 13:1-22; Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Numbers 18:21-24; John 5:5-16.

1. In our previous lessons, we studied about how Ezra and Nehemiah together encouraged and inspired the people to rebuild the wall, then celebrated that event by marching around on top of the wall, and ended with celebrating at the temple.
2. Earlier, they had made that covenant: (1) Not to intermarry with foreign pagans, (2) Not to violate the Sabbath, and (3) To support the temple services with the required offerings and tithes. (Nehemiah 10:28-35)
3. Nehemiah stayed in Jerusalem for about 12 years on his first visit. At some point, he returned to either Babylon or Susa to serve the emperor again. Sometime later, he went back for his second visit as Judean Governor. That was probably around 430-425 B.C.
4. We do not know if he had received any messages about what was happening in Jerusalem and the surrounding territories while he was gone. But, when he went back, he was shocked to find that the people were breaking all three of their promises.

Support for the Temple

Nehemiah 13:10-14: ¹⁰ I also learnt that the temple musicians and other Levites had left Jerusalem and gone back to their farms, because the people had not been giving them enough to live on. ¹¹I reprimanded the officials for letting the Temple be neglected. And I brought the Levites and musicians back to the Temple and put them to work again. ¹²Then all the people of Israel again started bringing to the temple storerooms their tithes of corn, wine, and olive oil. ¹³I put the following men in charge of the storerooms: Shelemiah, a priest; Zadok, a scholar of the Law; and Pedaiah, a Levite. Hanan, the son of Zaccur and grandson of Mattaniah, was to be their assistant. I knew I could trust these men to be honest in distributing the supplies to their fellow-workers. ¹⁴ Remember, my God, all these things that I have done for your Temple and its worship.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Nehemiah 13:10-14). New York: American Bible Society.

5. Clearly, the temple workers were not being adequately supported by the tithes and offerings that were supposed to be given to the Levites. So, finally, they had to leave their positions in the temple and try to establish themselves where they could earn a living in order to feed their families.

Not only had the temple been profaned, but the offerings had been misapplied. This had tended to discourage the liberalities of the people. They had lost their zeal and fervor, and were reluctant to pay their tithes. The treasuries of the Lord's house were poorly supplied; many of the singers and others employed in the temple service, not receiving sufficient support, had left the work of God to labor elsewhere.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 670.2.

6. If we feel that church funds are being misused today, should we stop paying tithe?

Consider the widow's two coins and Jesus's response. (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4)

7. It seems that besides being a forceful leader, Nehemiah had the support of a lot of other members of the community. Step-by-step and without delay, he stopped all the corruption that was taking place. Remember that he had the backing of the emperor.
8. However, Eliashib, the official high priest and descendent of Aaron, was not removed. Since he was probably one of the main culprits, why was he allowed to stay?

Numbers 18:21-24: ²¹ The LORD said, "I have given to the Levites every tithe that the people of Israel present to me. This is in payment for their service in taking care of the Tent of my presence. ²²The other Israelites must no longer approach the Tent and in this way bring on themselves the penalty of death. ²³From now on only the Levites will take care of the Tent and bear the full responsibility for it. This is a permanent rule that applies also to your descendants. The Levites shall have no permanent property in Israel, ²⁴because I have given to them as their possession the tithe which the Israelites present to me as a special contribution. That is why I told them that they would have no permanent property in Israel."—*Good News Bible*.*

9. Malachi, a prophet who lived about the same time as Nehemiah, said:

Malachi 3:10: [The LORD said:] "Bring the full amount of your tithes to the Temple, so that there will be plenty of food there. Put me to the test and you will see that I will open the windows of heaven and pour out on you in abundance all kinds of good things."—*Good News Bible*.*†

10. Jesus also had some very significant words about tithing to share with the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

Matthew 23:23: [Jesus said:] "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You give to God a tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill, and cumin, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty. These you should practice, without neglecting the others."—*Good News Bible*.*†

11. What kind of efforts do you think might have been used to encourage people to continue paying their tithes and offerings? Had they stopped going to the temple for worship?

"The tithing system is beautiful in its simplicity. Its equity is revealed in its proportional claim on the rich and on the poor. In proportion as God has given us the use of His property, so we are to return to Him a tithe.

"When God calls for the tithe (Mal. 3:10), He makes no appeal to gratitude or generosity. Although gratitude should be a part of all our expressions to God, we tithe because God has commanded it. The tithe belongs to the Lord, and He requests that we return it to Him."—*Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .* (2nd ed.) (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 2005), p. 304.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Tuesday, December 10].‡

12. What do you think would happen to our churches today if people stopped paying tithes? Not only would our pastors and other church employees have to leave their jobs, but also efforts to reach out to other parts of the world which are supported by the church

organization would have to stop—unless, of course, they were willing to work for free or support themselves with a second job as Paul did.

13. Read Malachi 3:10. Is this verse supposed to apply to all of us? Are we given the option of saying that if we do not need blessings poured out from heaven, we do not have to pay tithe? Why do we give our tithes? Tithing is a system carefully designed by God to show our recognition that everything we have, including the life and health which we enjoy, and that everything we can possibly earn really is a gift from Him. Whatever we are able to earn is because God has given us a life and health to do so. By returning 10%, or tithe, we are recognizing the blessings God has bestowed upon us.
14. What do you think would happen today if a Nehemiah arose in our church and sought to enforce strict tithing requirements? Today, it is estimated that only 25% of Seventh-day Adventists pay a faithful tithe. Does that seem correct to you? Is it morally right?
15. In the Old Testament, there are two very specific references to the giving of tithe that are of interest. In Genesis 14 after the cities in the plain were conquered by the Mesopotamian kings and all the people and their possessions were taken captive including Lot and his family, Abraham chased after them with 318 of his trained warriors. With God's help they completely defeated the enemies and returned Lot and the others to their homes. It was the custom in those days when someone did something like that, that they were allowed to keep whatever loot they wanted. Abraham refused to keep that wealth. He gave a tithe of what he had collected to Melchizedek, "the priest of God Most High." (Genesis 14:18, *NKJV**) Surely, Abraham was thankful for his victory over that imposing force from Mesopotamia. Abraham's warriors must have been significantly outnumbered; but, they still won the battle with God's help, of course. See also Hebrews 7:1-4, especially verses 2&4.
16. Jacob was fleeing from his brother Esau and headed to a distant relative's home in a place to which he had never been and knew almost nothing about. He was very tired and afraid. But, when he lay down, God gave him an encouraging dream. Later, he promised God that whatever blessings God would give him, he would return a tithe. To whom did Jacob give his tithe? Do we have any information about that? Did he give it to the poor?
17. Do you feel that tithe-giving is a duty? Or, a privilege? God asks for one-seventh of our time as well as one-tenth of our income. Are those reasonable requests? Who loses if we do our business on the Sabbath? Or, refuse to pay tithe? Is it God? Or, the church? Or, us? How much are we dependent upon the gifts of God for everything we are and have?
18. Is there a basic principle behind tithing 10%? Is that a reasonable figure? What lessons should we learn from tithing?

Sabbath

Nehemiah 13:15-16: ¹⁵ At that time I saw people in Judah pressing juice from grapes on the Sabbath. Others were loading corn, wine, grapes, figs, and other things on their donkeys and taking them into Jerusalem; I warned them not to sell anything on the Sabbath. ¹⁶Some people from the city of Tyre were living in Jerusalem, and they brought fish and all kinds of goods into the city to sell to our people on the Sabbath.— *Good News Bible.**

19. Why do you think those people in and around Jerusalem so quickly went back to treating the Sabbath as an ordinary day? Did the people feel that keeping the Sabbath and going to the temple for worship was not really benefitting them? Apparently, the Jewish leaders including the temple staff were not making any effort to enforce the correct keeping of the

Sabbath. What did the Jews do on the Sabbath in their day? Did they gather somewhere?

Nehemiah 13:17-22: ¹⁷I reprimanded the Jewish leaders and said, “Look at the evil you’re doing! You’re making the Sabbath unholy. ¹⁸This is exactly why God punished your ancestors when he brought destruction on this city. And yet you insist on bringing more of God’s anger down on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.”

¹⁹ So I gave orders for the city gates to be shut at the beginning of every Sabbath, as soon as evening began to fall, and not to be opened again until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my men at the gates to make sure that nothing was brought into the city on the Sabbath. ²⁰Once or twice merchants who sold all kinds of goods spent Friday night outside the city walls. ²¹I warned them, “It’s no use waiting out there for morning to come. If you try this again, I’ll use force against you.” From then on they did not come back on the Sabbath. ²²I ordered the Levites to purify themselves and to go and guard the gates to make sure that the Sabbath was kept holy.

Remember me, O God, for this also, and spare me because of your great love.—*Good News Bible*.*

20. Why did Nehemiah as a government official have to try to correct all those spiritual problems that should have been taken care of by the temple staff, especially Eliashib?
21. Would you call Nehemiah’s Sabbathkeeping efforts legalistic? What does it mean to be *legalistic*? Should people be allowed to keep the Sabbath as they see fit? Or, should we impose strict rules about doing so? That is what the Pharisees did! (Colossians 2:16) How did Jesus keep the Sabbath? Would it be a good idea to follow His example?
22. Why is slow and steady compromise such a pervasive force in the world? Are people constantly trying to test the boundaries of God’s will? Do children do that? Are we always wanting to try something new? It is clear that many foreign traders had gone to Jerusalem and apparently were making good money doing it. They did not want to lose their business on the Sabbath day. Nehemiah had to take forceful measures to stop that traffic.

Nehemiah fearlessly rebuked them for their neglect of duty. “What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the Sabbath day?” he sternly demanded. “Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the Sabbath.” He then gave command that “when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath,” they should be shut, and not opened again till the Sabbath was past; and having more confidence in his own servants than in those that the magistrates of Jerusalem might appoint, he stationed them at the gates to see that his orders were enforced.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 671.2-672.0.

23. Nehemiah felt that he could not trust the people who were normally the responsible authorities; therefore, he sent his own people to guard the gates for a period of time.
24. Many of Jesus’s most important miracles were done on the Sabbath. See Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11; and John 5:5-16. Did Jesus intentionally perform these miracles on the Sabbath? Or, was the Sabbath an opportunity for people to gather together and, thus, often presented opportunities for ill or disabled people to find Jesus?

25. Did the Pharisees look back at the experiences of Nehemiah and feel like they needed to follow his example? Why do you think the Jewish leaders felt that what Jesus was doing on the Sabbath was so serious that they wanted to kill Him? (Mark 3:6) Finally, Jesus essentially had to say: “You should do all these things such as tithing carefully the mint and anise and cummin; but, even more important, you must remember justice and mercy and faith.” (See Matthew 23:23.)
26. God gave a number of very strong instructions about Sabbathkeeping. They started with the experience recorded in Exodus 16 when the children of Israel were instructed about the collection and use of the manna. But, there were some other instructions that seem quite harsh:
- Exodus 35:3:** [Moses related what God had told him to tell the people:] “Do not even light a fire in your homes on the Sabbath.”—*Good News Bible*.*†
- Jeremiah 17:21-23:** [The LORD said:] ²¹ “Tell them that if they love their lives, they must not carry any load on the Sabbath; they must not carry anything in through the gates of Jerusalem ²²or carry anything out of their houses on the Sabbath. They must not work on the Sabbath; they must observe it as a sacred day, as I commanded their ancestors. ²³Their ancestors did not listen to me or pay any attention. Instead, they became stubborn; they would not obey me or learn from me.”—*Good News Bible*.*†
27. If you live in a cold climate, is it against the commandment to start a fire on the Sabbath? Or, turn on the heater? What principles about Sabbathkeeping should we learn from the experiences of Jesus versus the Pharisees regarding miracles He performed on the Sabbath? Do Seventh-day Adventists in our day generally keep the Sabbath holy?

Marrying Idolaters

28. Read Deuteronomy 23:3-6 and Nehemiah 13:1-3. Clearly, they had been told in the writings of Moses that they were not to intermarry with pagan foreigners. When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he found that Eliashib, the Jewish high priest, had developed a relationship with Tobiah, the Ammonite, probably through marriage of their children or grandchildren; and Tobiah was actually occupying a room in the temple in Jerusalem.
- Nehemiah 13:8-9:** ⁸I was furious and threw out all Tobiah’s belongings. ⁹I gave orders for the rooms to be ritually purified and for the temple equipment, grain offerings, and incense to be put back.—*Good News Bible*.*
29. Review Nehemiah 2:10,19 and Nehemiah 3:1. Clearly, Tobiah and his friend Sanballat had done everything they could to stop the rebuilding of the wall and to discourage the people who were attempting to do that.
30. Why do you suppose Tobiah wanted to have a room in the temple in Jerusalem?
31. Sanballat the Horonite, Nehemiah’s other major adversary on his first arrival in Jerusalem, had a daughter who was married to Eliashib’s grandson. Thus, we see that the two most active adversaries of the Jews had aligned themselves with some of the highest ranking officials in the Jewish temple and nation. Did it start by being “politically correct”?
32. Were Tobiah and Sanballat trying to establish themselves as officials or even leaders in the Jewish government? Nehemiah was not going to tolerate that for a second. Why did it and why does it seem to be so easy for God’s people to be led astray by the Devil’s advocates?

As he set before them God's commands and threatenings, and the fearful judgments visited on Israel in the past for this very sin, their consciences were aroused, and a work of reformation was begun that turned away God's threatened anger and brought His approval and blessing.

There were some in sacred office who pleaded for their heathen wives, declaring that they could not bring themselves to separate from them. But no distinction was made; no respect was shown for rank or position. **Whoever among the priests or rulers refused to sever his connection with idolaters was immediately separated from the service of the Lord. A grandson of the high priest, having married a daughter of the notorious Sanballat, was not only removed from office, but promptly banished from Israel.** "Remember them, O my God," Nehemiah prayed, "because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 673.3-674.1.†

Nehemiah 13:23-27: ²³ At that time I also discovered that many of the Jewish men had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴**Half their children spoke the language of Ashdod or some other language and didn't know how to speak our language.** ²⁵I reprimanded the men, called down curses on them, beat them, and pulled out their hair. Then I made them take an oath in God's name that never again would they or their children intermarry with foreigners. ²⁶I said, "It was foreign women that made King Solomon sin. He was a man who was greater than any of the kings of other nations. God loved him and made him king over all Israel, and yet he fell into this sin. ²⁷Are we then to follow your example and disobey our God by marrying foreign women?"—*Good News Bible*.*†

33. Is it any wonder that Nehemiah felt that he had to take very serious steps in dealing with those backsliders? Half of their children could not even speak Aramaic, the language of the Jews at that time. So, how could they worship and follow the customs of the Jews if they could not even speak their language? Today, could one have meaningful worship in a language he does not understand?
34. Then, Nehemiah mentioned the example of Solomon with which everyone was familiar. He made it very clear that was not the way he wanted things to go!
35. Would it be a Christian thing to do to tear families apart and send wives and their children home to another country? Did any of the husbands go with them? Was this an extreme action by Nehemiah that was not really justified?
36. When Nehemiah's initial reforms were called for based on the reading of Scripture, did the people later think that maybe those reforms were too harsh?
37. Why do you suppose God's rules about the Ammonites and the Moabites were so strong by not even allowing any of them to join God's people for ten generations? What about Ruth?

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