

Backslidden People



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Neh. 13:1–9, Deut. 23:3–6, Neh. 13:10–14, Num. 18:21–24, Neh. 13:15–22, John 5:5–16.*

Memory Text: “And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!” (*Nehemiah 13:22, NKJV*).

In the interim between chapters 12 and 13, Nehemiah returns to Babylon. Though we don't know how long he was gone, when he returned (probably around 430–425 B.C.) the people were backsliding. Though they had covenanted with God on these matters: first, not to intermarry with idolaters; second, to observe the Sabbath carefully; and, third, to take care of the temple and its personnel by tithe and offerings (*Nehemiah 10*)—they had violated all three of these promises.

By the time Nehemiah returned, he found them very lax in their devotion to God. The people had stopped returning tithes and offerings, begun using temple rooms for other purposes, ceased keeping the Sabbath properly, and even returned to intermarriage with the nations around them. Worst of all, it was the leadership whom he had left behind that contributed to the decline in the Israelites' relationship with God. It is not surprising that Nehemiah was devastated when he discovered how much had changed. However, instead of accepting it, once again as his character demanded, he acted for God's glory.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 14.

Tainted Temple Leadership

Nehemiah 13 begins with a concern about Ammonite and Moabite foreigners or idolaters in their midst (*Neh. 13:1–3*). These verses do not speak about driving away individuals from a different nation or race who followed God, but rather they refer to sending away those who were of a different faith—not converts but idolaters. *See also Deut. 23:3–6.*

Read Nehemiah 13:1–9. Who were Eliashib and Tobiah? Why is what they did unacceptable? Look at *Neh. 2:10, 19; 3:1; 12:10, 22; 13:28.*

Both Eliashib and Tobiah are known figures in the book of Nehemiah. Eliashib was the high priest of the nation, and he also was in charge of the temple. Tobiah is mentioned as the Ammonite enemy of Nehemiah who vehemently opposed his work in Jerusalem. The alliance of Eliashib and Tobiah suggests a relationship established through marriage.

Even though records of the marriage connection have not been preserved, we know that Tobiah had a Jewish name (meaning the “Lord is good”), and thus most likely came from a Jewish background. His wife’s family, the descendants of Arah, though unidentified, are believed to have been related to Eliashib’s family. Additionally, Sanballat the Horonite, Nehemiah’s other opponent, had a daughter who was married to Eliashib’s grandson. Therefore, the circle of intrigue around Nehemiah must have been intense as the highest-ranked officials in the land were related and in an alliance against Nehemiah’s leadership.

During the governor’s absence, the high priest gave Tobiah one of the rooms in the temple that was designated to hold the tithe, gifts, and offerings. Tobiah was granted permanent residence in the temple, a way of establishing him as one of the leaders of the nation. The enemies of Nehemiah finally achieved what they wanted all along: to displace Nehemiah and be in charge themselves. Fortunately, Nehemiah wasn’t going to sit by and do nothing.

Why do God’s people all through sacred history—whether the Jews in ancient Israel, or the Christians who followed them during and after New Testament times—so easily allow themselves to be led astray? How can we avoid their mistakes?

The Levites in the Fields

Read Nehemiah 13:10–14. What is Nehemiah seeking to remedy here?

The singers, gatekeepers, and other temple servants had to go back to working in their own fields in order to feed their families, because the work for God was not being supported. The whole tithes-and-offerings system that was so painstakingly established now lay in ruins. Nehemiah had to start over. The act of throwing everything out of the room shows desperation.

“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*, p. 670.

It is fascinating to see that all of Judah came together again and rebuilt what had been destroyed. The people were on Nehemiah’s side against Tobiah and Eliashib, because they must have realized that Nehemiah did everything he could for the benefit of the people. Additionally, Nehemiah entrusted the temple grounds overseers’ positions to men whom he considered faithful and trustworthy. They were given the task of collecting tithes and offerings, making sure the goods were stored properly, and distributing the resources to the appropriate parties. In other words, Nehemiah came in and uprooted the corrupt system of leadership seemingly in one fell swoop.

Although Nehemiah appointed faithful men over the organization of the temple, the corrupt high priest, Eliashib, did not lose his position, because it was handed down through Aaron’s descent. His work in the temple might have been crippled by Nehemiah’s measures of appointing others over some of the high priest’s responsibilities, but he was still the high priest.

Nehemiah had prayed, “Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its services!” (Neh. 13:14, NKJV). What was so human about that prayer?

Tithes and Offerings

Nehemiah's reforms of the temple services included the implementation of tithes and offerings.

Read Numbers 18:21–24; Malachi 3:10; Matthew 23:23; 1 Corinthians 9:7–14; 2 Corinthians 9:6–8; and Hebrews 7:1, 2. **What do these texts teach us about the importance of tithes and offerings, not just in the temple service, but for today, as well?**

Without the collection of tithes and offerings, the temple could not function. When tithing stopped, the services in the temple fell apart, and the whole worship system was in jeopardy. As temple personnel went to look for other jobs to feed their families, they couldn't focus on taking care of the temple. Consequently, the worship of God diminished.

“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.

Just as happened with the Israelite temple, our church would fall apart without the support of the members' tithes and offerings. Our church services would not function without people who are paid to put time into quality ministry, planning, and management of the church for God. Worship of God also would be diminished in quality. Most important, though, without tithes and offerings evangelism would be nonexistent.

Moreover, we give tithes because God established the system in His Word. There are times God doesn't have to explain why He set something up. He expects us to trust that He is in control. We should find out and be informed on how the system works, but then entrust it into His hands.

Why is tithing so important for our own spirituality and as a measure of our own trust in God?

Treading the Winepresses on Sabbath

Read Nehemiah 13:15, 16. What is the issue that Nehemiah addresses here?

It is not easy to stand up for God when you are in the minority. Because God said that the Sabbath was to be a holy day on which no one was to do any work, Nehemiah intended to make sure that this command was followed in Jerusalem. No doubt he felt a moral obligation to take the position he did and then act upon it.

The Sabbath was created as the pinnacle of Creation week because it was a special day on which people were to be renewed and re-created by spending time with God in ways that they can't when engaged in their occupations or other worldly pursuits.

It has been said that "more than Israel kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept Israel." The point is that the seventh-day Sabbath was, and remains, a powerful means of helping keep faith alive in those who by God's grace seek to observe it and enjoy the physical and spiritual benefits it offers us.

Read Nehemiah 13:17–22. What does Nehemiah do in order to stop the "buying and selling" on the Sabbath?

Because Nehemiah is the governor of Judah, he sees his role as the enforcer of the rules. Because the rules in Judah were based on the law of God, he becomes a guardian of that law, including the Sabbath. Maybe if the nobles of Judah had stood up to the corruption brought in by the high priest, Nehemiah wouldn't have found himself in this situation. However, the rulers and nobles perhaps already resented Nehemiah for making them give back to the poor earlier; thus, they didn't seem to object to the changes Eliashib and Tobiah brought in either.

Nehemiah rebukes the nobles first and then commands that the gates be shut and posts servants at the gates to guard them. When the marketplace simply moves from inside the city to the outside, he takes even more drastic measures and threatens to lay a hand on the merchants the next Sabbath. Nehemiah must have been a man of his word, because the merchants got the point and stayed away from then on.

Did Not Your Fathers Do Thus?

Nehemiah's zeal for the Sabbath day is admirable. Nehemiah was so passionate about observing the Sabbath correctly that he even promised to "lay hands" on the merchants from other nations. In other words, he would have personally intervened if he had caught them in the city or by the gates on the Sabbath again. As a governor he had official responsibilities to make sure that this commandment was kept properly.

"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*, pp. 671, 672.

Nehemiah's warning about Sabbath desecration, along with other warnings about violating it, had apparently echoed down through the ages even to Jesus' time. We know this because the Gospels time and again portray Jesus as struggling with the religious leaders over proper Sabbath keeping.

Read Matthew 12:1–8, Mark 3:1–6, Luke 6:6–11, and John 5:5–16. What was the issue here, and how does an understanding of ancient Israel's history help explain why the controversy arose?

In their zeal, however misguided, to make sure that the Sabbath was not "desecrated," these religious leaders were so fanatical that they accused Jesus, the "Lord of the Sabbath" (*Luke 6:5, NKJV*), of violating it. Talk about taking a good thing too far! The irony is that while many of these men expressed great concern about the law, they forgot the "weightier matters" of that law: "justice and mercy and faith" (*Matt. 23:23, NKJV*).

How can we, as individuals and as a church, be careful not to make the same kind of mistake that these men did, whether with the Sabbath or with something else that we believe is important to the faith?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Rejoicing in the Lord,” pp. 115–126, in *Steps to Christ*.

“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*, pp. 673, 674.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read the Ellen G. White quote above. In class, talk about what you think about what Nehemiah did, not making any exceptions, even for those who seemed truly to love their wives and did not want to separate from them. Do you think Nehemiah was too strong, too unyielding, and could have made some exceptions? Why, or why not? In this same context, how does the church exercise discipline in love and understanding—and at the same time be consistent and not diminish God’s standards of truth?
- 2 Though we know that there is nothing legalistic about keeping the seventh-day Sabbath—just as there is nothing legalistic about not coveting, stealing, or lying—how can we be careful not to make Sabbath keeping (or obedience to any commandment) into something that becomes legalistic? Why is keeping the Cross and what Christ has done for us on the cross always before us the most powerful protection against the trap of legalism?
- 3 At the same time, how can we protect ourselves against the dangers that come from slow but steady compromise, such as what Nehemiah confronted?

Secret to Happy Home

By ANDREW McCHESNEY, Adventist Mission

Home was not a happy place for Hazel Moyo. Her father drank, and her parents argued frequently in Gwanda, a small town in Zimbabwe. Hazel longed to have a happy family.

At the age of 14, Hazel made a decision that triggered a chain of events that would change her home forever. She started going to church. She saw other children heading to Sunday services, and she wanted to go, too. So, she took her nine-year-old brother by the hand and went. After high school, Hazel saw a newspaper advertisement for Solusi University, a Seventh-day Adventist institution located about two and a half hours by bus from her home. She met university recruiters when they visited her town, and her father agreed to pay for her tuition.

At Solusi, Hazel soon joined a singing group and asked them many questions about the Sabbath. One of the group's members, a young married pastor named Elyght Nyatanga, announced, "I want this girl to be my daughter," he said. "Every Wednesday, I will pray and fast for her to know God."

Five other group members liked the idea and, together with Hazel, joined in.

For three months they prayed and fasted. Then Solusi University held a Week of Prayer, and Hazel was baptized.

When Hazel turned 23, Elyght presented her with Ellen White's book *Messages to Young People*. Hazel was touched by the advice for happy families. She wanted a happy family. "I learned how you approach an angry parent, how you address some of the issues that you have with parents, and how to show honor to your parents," she said. A favorite passage on page 331 says, "There are many children who profess to know the truth, who do not render to their parents the honor and affection that are due to them, who manifest but little love to father and mother, and fail to honor them in deferring to their wishes, or in seeking to relieve them of anxiety."

Joy began to fill Hazel's home as she followed the book's advice. Then during a school break, Hazel invited her parents to read the Bible and pray before going to bed. They agreed! The next evening, Mother asked Hazel to read the Bible and pray again. Soon the family began having evening and morning worship every day. Happiness now permeates the home, and Hazel is praying for her family to be baptized. "Now we are a happy family—the kind of family that I always wanted," said Hazel, left.



Part of a 2015 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering went to Solusi University to double the size of its cafeteria from 500 seats to 1,000. Thank you for your mission offerings that allow Adventist schools like Solusi to work with the Holy Spirit to change families for eternity.