

The Hunger of the Wilderness

Nehemiah 13

In December, 2003, *Parade Magazine* reported of a church youth group in Athens, Georgia that caused a bomb scare while attempting a “random act of kindness.” They left a package of candy inside an old decorative cannon. When a city employee reported a “suspicious package,” the police evacuated the city building. The bomb squad used a robot to extract the package, and then used a shotgun to blow up the gift of taffy and hard candies. The youth director had to rethink her intended lesson. She had to settle with teaching them that “things don’t always turn out like they’re planned.”

The story of Nehemiah does not have the happy ending Nehemiah himself would have preferred. In fact, if he had had his preference, the book would have probably ended with chapter 12. I think you might appreciate my point after you indulge me in a summary of the story of Nehemiah to date.

The story began with Nehemiah, a Jew, serving as a cupbearer to the king of Persia. He is distressed to hear that the walls of Jerusalem have never been rebuilt even though the city had been resettled after the captivity for several years. One day, the king notices the sadness of his countenance, and Nehemiah shares his burden. The king is favorably disposed to allow him to go to Jerusalem and build the walls. Nehemiah is named governor and he journeys to Jerusalem to begin the project.

Local thugs from the surrounding nations resort to ridicule, threats and rumors in their attempts to derail the project, but their ploys fail to distract Nehemiah. A wall that lay in ruins for a century and a half is rebuilt in only fifty-two days. Once the city is safe insofar as enemies beyond the gates are concerned, Nehemiah gives attention to internal forces that undermine the holiness of God’s nation. Spiritual renewal based on obedience to God’s Law begins when the people of the city gather at the Water Gate. They are captivated by the Law. They stand for hours and listen as it is read. They are devastated by their sin. They break to joyously observe the Feast of Tabernacles, but they reconvene after the week-long festival to address some of these areas where repentance is sorely warranted.

The people resolve to do better. They put a vow into writing that they will honor God’s law. Eighty-four of their leaders affix their seals to the document, but all the people swear to uphold it. All that is left is for the city to be filled with people and for the walls to be dedicated. A few structures are set in place to help the people to keep their promises, and Jerusalem is good to go.

That would be a good ending! New walls, new commitment to purity, new resolve to obey God – if that was the end of the story, we might conclude, “And they lived happily ever after.” But, instead, Chapter 13 ... My title, “The Hunger of the Wilderness” is based on “The Law of the Wilderness,” chapter 29 of A.W. Tozer’s 1955 book, *The Root of Righteousness*. Listen carefully to an excerpt from that chapter:

“Every farmer knows the hunger of the wilderness, that hunger which no modern farm machinery, no improved agricultural methods, can ever quite destroy. No matter how well prepared the soil, how well kept the fences, how carefully painted the buildings, let the owner neglect for a while his prized and valued acres and they will revert again to the wild and be swallowed up by the jungle or the wasteland. The bias of nature is toward the wilderness, never toward the fruitful field. That, we repeat, every farmer knows.

“To the alert Christian this fact will be more than an observation of interest to farmers; it will be a parable, an object lesson setting forth a law that runs through all the regions of our fallen world, affecting things spiritual as well as things material. We cannot escape the law that would persuade all things to remain wild or to return to a wild state after a period of cultivation. What is true of the field is true also of the soul, if we are but wise enough to see it.

“The moral bent of the fallen world is not toward godliness, but definitely away from it. “Is this vile world a friend to grace,” asks the poet rhetorically, “to help me on to God?” The sad answer is no, and it would be well for us to see that each new Christian learn this lesson as soon as possible after his conversion. We sometimes leave the impression that it is possible to find at an altar of prayer, once and for all, purity of heart and power to assure victorious living for the rest of our days. How wrong this notion is has been proved by countless numbers of Christians through the centuries.

This “bias of nature toward the wilderness” is proven to be a reality in Chapter 13 of Nehemiah.

I. The Broken Vows of Jerusalem

¹On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, ²because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.) ³When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent. – Nehemiah 13:1-3

Nehemiah begins to tell of a new saga that began after he had journeyed to meet with King Artaxerxes. Why he went and how long he was gone are not recorded. But, upon his return to Jerusalem, he finds that foreigners are now being admitted “into the assembly of God.” The people should have known better, but the issue was now addressed at a public reading of the Law of Moses. The particular text addressed Moabites and Ammonites and cited the account of Balaam.

Moab and Ammon lay on the other side of the Jordan River from Israel. In the days of Moses, Moab would not allow the Israelites passage through their territory. Moab’s king hired Balaam, a prophet, to curse Israel, but after scaring Balaam’s socks off with a talking donkey and a sword-wielding angel, God told him, “Say what I tell you instead” The prophet happily agreed and uttered a blessing on Israel. Reminded of this, the Israelites gave the boot to all foreigners in matters of worship.

Now, Nehemiah backs up to describe all the problems that this foreign element had brought to bear. I now think back to that sealed document of promises that the people swore to in chapter 10. When we studied that event, I summarized the document into three distinct promises. Sadly, it is precisely those three promises that Nehemiah finds broken when he returns to Jerusalem

Broken Promise #1 We Will Live Obediently! verses 4-14

In chapter 10:32-39, the people swore: “We will bring our temple tax, the prescribed offerings for the festivals as well as those that cover our sins, the first-fruit of our crops and the firstborn of our flocks as well as the tithes and offerings that support the priests and the Levites. In summary: “We will not neglect the house of our God” (10:39). It is sadly ironic that when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he was compelled to ask, “Why is the house of God neglected? (13:11).

The bringing of tithes and offerings had broken down. Many Levites had turned to farming to make ends meet. But, it also seems that this issue was related to a pagan presence in the temple that had taken root during Nehemiah's absence. Tobiah, one of Nehemiah's enemies that had harassed the city during the construction of the wall had been provided with a storeroom on the grounds in which to keep his household goods. This could mean Tobiah was using the room as a storage unit, but it could also mean that he was using it as a residence while in Jerusalem.

⁸"I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. ⁹I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense." – Nehemiah 13:8, 9

Nehemiah's zeal for the purity of the temple was reminiscent to that of Jesus Himself when He cleared the temple of His day of rip-off artists who sold animals and exchanged currencies.

"If on the first visit he had been a whirlwind, on the second he was all fire and earthquake to a city that had settled down in his absence to a comfortable compromise with the gentile world." - D. Kidner

Broken Promise #2 We Will Maintain Spiritual and Material Balance! verses 15-22

The sealed document to which Jerusalem swore itself also included the following promise:

³¹"When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts. – Nehemiah 10:31

But, when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he found the winemakers busily at work as well as the merchants and farmers. The fish market, driven by foreigners from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem, was active. All sorts of commerce was taking place, so Nehemiah asked,

"What is this wicked thing you are doing – desecrating the Sabbath day? ¹⁸Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath." – Nehemiah 13:17, 18

On what would be our Friday evening, three trumpet blasts signaled people to stop working and three more signaled the beginning of the Sabbath. Nehemiah ordered that the gates, which were closed at dark anyway, be closed an hour or so early as the Sabbath neared just to insure that merchants with wares did not slip in. Some foreigners tried carrying on business as usual outside the city walls, but Nehemiah put an abrupt halt to that. "If you do this again, I will lay hands on you," he threatened. He was not talking about praying for them or imparting a spiritual gift to them, but arresting them.

Broken Promise #3 We Will Pursue Purity!

Again, from that sealed oath to which the nation had obligated itself:

"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons." – Nehemiah 10:30

And yet, when Nehemiah returned from the king he found the practice of intermarriage had been renewed on a rampant scale. Jews had taken wives from Moab, Ammon and Ashdod, an old Philistine city. Half the children of these unions could not speak the language of Judah because they were typically nurtured by their moms, who were foreigners. Nehemiah lost it at this point:

²⁵I 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 and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. – Nehemiah 13:25

Nehemiah reminded them of Solomon, Israel's greatest king in terms of political achievement and wealth. His reign began with a humble prayer for wisdom, but it ended with 700 wives and 300 concubines, mostly of foreign descent, and with a nation steeped in pagan worship. Intermarriage with pagans was one of the earliest prohibitions God gave His people in the days of Moses, but they kept ignoring Him to their own peril and heartache. That's the sad story of the permanency of Nehemiah's reforms when he was in town to police these various matters. But, why should that surprise us when we consider ...

II. Our Own Bias toward the Wilderness

Listen to another excerpt from Tozer's chapter on "*The Law of the Wilderness*"

"The truth is that no spiritual experience, however revolutionary, can exempt us from temptation; and what is temptation but the effort of the wilderness to encroach upon our new-cleared field? The purified heart is obnoxious to the devil and to all the forces of the lost world. They will not rest until they have won back what they have lost. The jungle will creep in and seek to swallow up the tiny areas that have been made free by the power of the Holy Ghost. Only watchfulness and constant prayer can preserve those moral gains won for us through the operations of God's grace."

This observation is vividly showcased in Nehemiah 13. So, what are some lessons for us to be drawn? What precautions must we take in our lives to ward off the hunger of the wilderness - in our own walks through this world, in our own devotional lives, in our churches?

1) Don't Play with Fire – There is a reason that God has always called His people out of the world. Most of the issues that invoked God's wrath upon His covenant nation had to do with pagan influences – pagan wives, pagan alliances, pagan gods, pagan allure. In Christ, a blessing came to the whole world, and it is no longer about keeping a bloodline pure, but it is very much about keeping a spiritual race of people pure. We cannot live for God if we love the world.

2) Rationalizations Never Excuse Disobedience – Sin is sin in spite of our excuses. Each broken promise in our text could be justified by worldly logic. Regarding foreign wives, the men who returned to Jerusalem outnumbered the women. Marriages were often entered into to forge political alliances. It may be that some of the Jewish women who endured the hardship of the journey from Babylon and the work of reestablishing a nation were starting to look a little weather-beaten compared to some of those cute little pagan numbers. Commerce on the Sabbath seemed like good business. Tobiah's room was not technically a part of the temple proper. But, as artful as we are at rationalizing, excuses didn't work for Adam and Eve when they tried to shift blame for their disobedience and they don't work for us.

3) Say "Yes!" to God's Priorities when Disappointed – Nehemiah governed in Jerusalem for twelve years. Then, while the cat was away, the mice completely lost their minds. Upon his return, Nehemiah must have been devastated. He should have returned to Babylon. Why endure heartbreak, disappointment and the sinful behavior of others when there's a safe place to hide or a more profitable enterprise down the road? But, even though Nehemiah's patience was tested, his values and his sense of right and wrong were still governed by God's Law just as they had been in the earlier days. He simply went back to work for the cause of God as he understood it.

4) Pursue Loyalty over Legacy

Three brief prayers of Nehemiah appear in this chapter, one after each of his major reforms:

Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services. – Nehemiah 13:14 (after purifying the storehouses)

Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love. – Nehemiah 13:22 (after addressing the desecration of the Sabbath day)

Remember me with favor, O my God. – Nehemiah 13:31 (after addressing intermarriage)

Nehemiah's actions were resented by the ringleaders of the sinful activities he took action against. He acted from love for the nation at large and he did what was right in God's eyes, but there would still be ripples. Nevertheless, Nehemiah was not concerned about his popularity. His prayers were that God would scrutinize his deeds and the heart that drove those deeds and judge him accordingly.

5) Be Vigilant against Spiritual Decline – A room had officially been provided to the pagan Tobiah, but when Nehemiah threw his stuff out, he ordered the purification of a plurality of "rooms" (verse 9). Might Tobiah's stuff have been spilling over into other storerooms? One preacher likened moral failure and spiritual decline to a flat tire. Most flats are not blow-outs. You pick up a nail or the bead and the rim don't seal well. The tire just goes flat, sometimes, very slowly. Spiritual life and passion often disappear like air pressure, over time.

"David, for example, did not wake up one morning in shameful compromise. He began by giving responsibilities that should have been his to other people, by indulging himself in little things, and he ended up as an adulterer and murderer ... " - Steve Zeisler

6) Praise God for His Holy Spirit

Those of us in Christ must acknowledge what a remarkable gift is the Holy Spirit for our lives. He helps us to say "No" to ungodly passions. He guides us into truth by helping us to process God's Word. He convicts us of our sins and assures us of divine forgiveness. He brings us into a fellowship with God so intimate that we can cry out "Abba, Father." The Old Testament saint labored to keep the Law. Because of the Spirit, we are empowered from on high to walk righteously, to love sincerely and to witness courageously. Thank God for the gift of the Spirit.

And now, one more observation from Tozer's *"The Law of the Wilderness"* ...

"The neglected heart will soon be a heart overrun with worldly thoughts; the neglected life will soon become a moral chaos; the church that is not jealously protected by mighty intercession and sacrificial labors will before long become the abode of every evil bird and the hiding place for unsuspected corruption. The creeping wilderness will soon take over that church that trusts in its own strength and forgets to watch and pray.

"The law of the wilderness operates universally throughout our fallen world ..."