



Setbacks & Way Forward

Nehemiah 13

Nehemiah 12 contains the climax (high point) of the book of Nehemiah. In a special worship service, the people joyfully celebrated what God had done (12:43). The peoples' worship continued after the special worship service (12:44-47). However, after Nehemiah left Jerusalem to return to the king, things changed (13:6).¹

Judah's Setbacks

- ❑ When Nehemiah came back to Jerusalem he found setbacks (reversals in progress).
- ❑ Read Nehemiah 13:4-22. Earlier, the people had committed to obey the Law of God, but Nehemiah found they had failed to follow through on their commitments.
- ❑ The first thing Nehemiah mentioned was Eliashib allowing Tobiah to move into a storeroom of the temple (13:4-5). The storerooms were supposed to be used for storing offerings, tithes, contributions and temple articles, *not* the housing of enemies.² What else did Nehemiah find?

<i>Commitment (Nehemiah 10)</i>	<i>Setback (Nehemiah 13)</i>
"we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites" (10:37)	"I...learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not be given to them" (13:10)
"We will not neglect the house of our God." (10:39)	"Why is the house of God neglected?" (13:11)
"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." (10:31)	"What is this wicked thing you are doing – desecrating the Sabbath day?" (13:17)
"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons" (10:30)	"I saw men of Judah who had married [foreign] women" (13:23, 25)

1. While the people (including priests, Levites and officials) had made commitments to God, many of them failed to follow through on their commitments. Why do you think this happened? Why does it happen to people in general?

Nehemiah's Reforms

- ❑ In response to these setbacks, Nehemiah took action. He removed Tobiah's stuff, had the storerooms purified, and restored them to their intended use (13:8-9). He called back the Levites and musicians, and restored the services needed for their provision (13:10-12). He put trustworthy people in charge of the storerooms and the distribution of supplies (13:13).
- ❑ Nehemiah also took action in response to the peoples' profaning³ of the Sabbath. He told the people to stop their business activities on the Sabbath (13:15). He reminded them of the past consequences of disobedience (13:18). He closed the doors on Sabbath commerce (13:19).

¹ Nehemiah first came to Jerusalem in 'the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' (2:1; 5:14) – 445 BC. He returned to the king in 'the thirty-second year' of the king (5:14; 13:6) – 433 BC.

² Tobiah the Ammonite had opposed Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the wall (2:10, 19; 4:3, 7; 6:1, 12-14; 19).

³ 'Sabbath' means 'cessation, rest.' God's people were commanded to keep the Sabbath day 'holy' – that is, to set it apart as special day for rest and reflection on God's gracious redemption (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). To treat the Sabbath as just another day of the week was to profane or desecrate it, which is the opposite of keeping it holy.

The Sabbath & Us

- ❑ How does the Sabbath commandment (one of the “10 Commandments”) apply to us today? Christians differ in their response to this question.⁴
 - ❑ Some believe we are still commanded to keep the Sabbath, though most apply the Sabbath to Sunday.⁵ Others believe that Christians are *not* commanded to keep the Sabbath since it was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, in whom we have the ultimate “rest” (*Hebrews 4:1-11*). Though not commanded, most would agree that a weekly day of rest has great practical value.⁶
 - 📖 “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (*Col. 2:16-17, NIV*)
 - 📖 Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...and you will find rest for your souls.” (*Matthew 11:28, 29b, NIV*)
2. In our world today, we work, work, work. If we are “successful” in our work, it brings a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Is the essence of a person found in his or her work? Is our work the most important thing about us? Explain.
 3. Our work can never truly fulfill the deepest needs of our hearts.⁷ To realize this, we need “rest.”⁸ In what ways do we need to “rest” from our work? In what ways can we apply the Sabbath to our lives?

Everyone's Hope

- ❑ After the climax of Nehemiah 12, the setbacks of chapter 13 may be discouraging. But it’s a reminder of our need of God’s salvation. The “Way Forward” is ultimately Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and was raised from the dead. In Christ, we have victory over sin and death.

Reflection/Application

- To experience true “rest,” we need to stop working to earn our true significance or salvation,⁹ and receive God’s gift of “rest” through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you need to receive Christ?
- As a Christian, is your work consuming you and preventing you from experiencing “rest?” What specific things do you need to do to enhance your worship and rest in the Lord?

⁴ See the lesson ‘Reverence & Rest’ in the series ‘God’s Will for His People’ on the ICF website, which provides more information. The book *Perspectives on the Sabbath*, edited by Christopher John Donato (2011), presents and defends four different views. Also, there are helpful articles on the Internet. My view is that Christians are *not* under the ‘binding authority’ of the Sabbath commandment because it is part of the *Old Covenant*. Christians will continue to disagree about how the Sabbath commandment applies to God’s people today. Read Romans 14:5-6. In any case, let us ‘make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification’ (*Romans 14:19*).

⁵ Certainly, Sunday (‘the Lord’s Day,’ the day of Jesus’s resurrection) became the special day of worship for Christians. However, the biblical basis for changing the ‘Sabbath day’ to Sunday is lacking in my opinion.

⁶ The weekly Sabbath had great practical value under the Old Testament, and a weekly day of rest *still* has great practical value. While Christians may not be commanded to keep the Sabbath (as in the Old Testament), it is still advisable to set aside a weekly day of ‘rest’ (Sunday works well for most) or else set aside other times for rest.

⁷ Work is certainly not bad. God made humans as workers (*Genesis 2:8, 15*). Christians should view their work as part of their service to God (*Colossians 3:23-24*). However, work is not the sum and purpose of human life. The Sabbath is a reminder of this fact. True meaning, purpose, and fulfillment are found only in relationship with God.

⁸ Biblical ‘rest’ is in relation to God – the Source of peace, purpose, true meaning and fulfillment and every blessing.

⁹ While we should work for the Lord, we can never earn our salvation (see Ephesians 2:8-9).