

## **Nehemiah 13:1-31<sup>1</sup>**

### ***God Loves Promise-Keepers***

#### **Introduction**

ILLUSTRATION: MediaCorp not too long ago ran a Chinese drama series titled “The Little Nyonya”. The story begins from the 1930s, spanning over 70 years till our time today.

The female lead character lost both her parents during the Japanese Occupation. She is passed around families and eventually ends up at her grandfather’s house. After the war, her maternal relatives who ran away to England to seek refuge during wartime return home. She then leads life like her mother—always being discriminated and beaten up. The male lead character comes from an educated and wealthy family. He hides his identity to be with the female lead. They fall in love deeply. Unfortunately, their relationship is filled with many obstacles and difficulties. Under pressure from his family, the male lead is forced to marry another woman.

The female lead refuses to be manipulated by others, and begins learning how to run a business. Though she is framed and ousted from her business, she manages to overcome the odds and save her declining family business. Sadly, her love life has yet to begin a new chapter with no news about the man she loves.

Fans criticized the ending used in the series as too sad and abrupt. MediaCorp decided later to air an alternative ending that lasted just 3 minutes.

But the new ending merely had the lovers tell each other why they couldn’t be together. They ended up separated, just as it was in the original ending. Again, this drew heavy criticisms from viewers, who told local newspapers that they felt they were being cheated.

It is only natural to desire happy ending in what happens in life. No one likes a sad, open-ended, and abrupt ending. Happy ending brings about good closure.

The Book of Nehemiah does not end with Neh 12. That would have been a good ending because it tells of the people dedicating themselves, their praises, and their gifts to God. They had promised that they “will not neglect the house of our God” (10: 39b).

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<sup>1</sup> 1984 NIV

But the Book of Nehemiah ended with Neh 13 where we read that Nehemiah had returned (probably a year) to Babylon to report to King Artaxerxes. When he returned to Jerusalem again, he discovered that the fires of devotion had gone out in Jerusalem. The people had defiled themselves by compromising and failed to keep their promises. Nehemiah had to rebuke them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" (13:11a).

There were two promises that the people of Israel failed to keep in their time. These are also promises that we today can fail to keep to our own detriment.

### **I. Failure to keep the promise to separate (13:1-5, 23-24)**

13:1-5 - On 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, because 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.) When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.

Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests

The Jews had earlier willingly separated themselves from the people of the land and united with their Jewish brothers and sisters to obey the Law and walk in the way of the Lord. But apparently their separation was incomplete, or some of the people formed new alliances. As the Law was read to them, they discovered that there were Ammonites and Moabites in their midst and this was contrary to the Law of Moses (Deut. 23:3-4).

Here's a bit of Old Testament history here. When the Israelites left Egypt they came into the country of the Ammonites and the Moabites. But these people did not offer them the kindness of food and water. Instead, they hired the prophet Balaam to curse them.

It was actually nine centuries before Nehemiah that Israel was mistreated by the Ammonites and the Moabites. Some of us must be saying, "That's a long time for God to stay mad!" This offends our sense of fairness. But the attempt of the Ammonites and the Moabites to curse Israel revealed something about their hearts. God saw into their hearts then and sees into our hearts today. God was not being unfair or bearing long-enduring grudges when He dealt with the Ammonites and Moabites. Rather He

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was dealing with something that ran much deeper.

The customs and practices of the Ammonites and Moabites were terribly degrading. If they were allowed to intermarry with the Israelites they would inject into the life of Israel some of these detestable things.

Ammon and Moab were the sons of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. During the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, as fire and brimstones were raining down upon these wicked cities, angels led Lot and his family up onto the mountainside. Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Lot and his two daughters hid in a cave in the mountain while the cities burned before them. These two daughters evidently thought that they were the last two women left on earth. So they contrived to trick their father into laying with them sexually. They both conceived and bore sons. One was named Ammon and the other Moab.

So Ammon and Moab were related to as well as bitter enemies of Israel. They were forever trying to corrupt, pollute, and destroy Israel. But Israel was forbidden to wipe them out because they were related to them.

The Bible warns us that we have an enemy like that. It is called "the flesh". The flesh is that inner commitment to self-centredness; to enthrone the self as master of one's life. There is something about us that wants to be king, wants to be lord, wants to be served, wants to control everything, and wants to run the world with ourselves as the centre of all things.

You may want to get inside of yourself to rip that thing out and get rid of it forever. But you cannot because it is related to you. Yet we are called to live above it in victory while we struggle with it. We are called to overcome it and to walk with God. That is the struggle of the Christian life.

We may label certain people as "Ammonites and Moabites". And then we give ourselves the excuse not to mix with them in order to hide our prejudice against them. But we are reminded that the greater and more dangerous "Ammonite" or "Moabite" is not someone outside us, but the flesh (sinful nature) that is inside us.

ILLUSTRATION: In the history of South Africa, the white Dutch settlers had tried to take literally the requirements of the Old Testament to separate the races and forbid their children to intermarry. The result of this is a very shameful and traumatic experience that divided the nation for almost 50 years.

Apartheid law then was divided into two main groups, namely petty apartheid and grand apartheid.

- An example of petty apartheid laws is the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act that made marriages between white and

people of other races illegal.

- Grand apartheid separated races on a large scale, forcing people to live and work in different places according to their race. This caused much heartache, especially for coloured people whose unique mixed race features often led to families being split up after members were assigned different races.

This is the evil of apartheid in South Africa. People looked at their fellow human beings and called them “Ammonites” and “Moabites”. But the real “Ammonite” and “Moabite” is the prejudiced self that is so blind to the ways and will of God, and that acts in ways that pain both God and others.

Having said that, we are also reminded that the Lord teaches us to be “wise as serpents but gentle as doves” in our fallen world. There will be people who may want to take advantage of the people of God in various ways. They want to belong to the fellowship of God’s people without trusting the Lord or submitting to His will. They want the blessings but not the responsibilities because their appetite is still for the things of the world.

Not only were some of the Jews married to Ammonites or Moabites, but also an Ammonite was living in the Jewish temple (13:4-5)! The high priest had allowed his grandson to marry into this Ammonite family. We learn later in this chapter that he had married the daughter of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, who was an ally of Tobiah the Ammonite (13:28). This alliance led to an invitation to Tobiah to actually move into the temple itself. To make room for him the high priest took over the storeroom that was set apart for the grain, oil and incense used by the Levites in their purification and ritual ceremonies.

Nehemiah took quick and decisive action. He lost no time throwing out the man, rededicating the room again to the Lord.

This forbidding of mixing and intermarrying with other races is not a portrayal of divinely approved racial prejudices. Rather it is a picture of the foolishness of trying to mix the world’s ways and God’s ways.

The “Ammonite” or “Moabite” we have to deal with can be the sinful nature in us, or the ungodly person in our midst, or even the godless influence that is passed down.

Neh 13:23-24 reads:

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the

other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah.

Nehemiah saw women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab married to Jewish men. He heard their children speaking foreign languages. (A child is more likely to learn how to speak from his mother with whom he spends more time.) If these children did not know the language of Israel, how could they read with understanding the Law of Moses? How could they read with understanding the Word of God? So, we see here a generation in danger of losing their faith and spiritual heritage.

When fathers or spiritual forebears disobey, it is the children or those who come after who will suffer. These children were forgetting how to communicate in the language of Judah. It's like the younger generation of Christians who grows up in churches forsaking their faith and walk with God, and turning to drugs and sexual promiscuity. They no longer understand the spiritual language of the faith of their fathers or spiritual forebears.

There were two promises that the people of Israel failed to keep in their time. These are also promises that we today can fail to keep to our own detriment. The first is failing to keep the promise to separate—not only from the ways of the world, but more importantly, from the ways of our own sinful nature.

## **II. Failure to keep the promise to observe Sabbath (13:15-22a)**

In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn'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."

When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. But I warned them and said, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you." From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard

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the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

These Sabbath reforms instituted by Nehemiah are still evident today.

- In Israel today, you cannot get a hot meal in a Jewish hotel from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday.
- The elevators will not be operating. You must use the stairs to get to your room.
- The shops are closed.
- Buses quit running.

This causes a great deal of inconvenience to tourists. Even many Jews do not like it today. Even in Nehemiah's day we can see that this was a burdensome requirement to the people. No work was to be done and no business to be carried out, making trade very inconvenient.

On his return from Babylon, Nehemiah discovered that during his absence in Jerusalem, people had begun to ignore the Sabbath day requirements. The streets were full of traffic. The stores were wide open.

His reaction was one of shock, not so much at what was happening, because this had happened before, but at the ease with which the people seemed to forget the lessons of the past. He reminded them that this violation was a serious thing. "What are you doing?" he cried. "Don't you know that God takes the Sabbath seriously? All the hurt, calamity and disaster that we have been going through has been caused by the failure of our forefathers to observe the Sabbath regulations."

Then, using his full authority as the governor, Nehemiah immediately ordered changes and reforms. It is clear that Nehemiah was deeply concerned by this disregard of the Law. So he ordered the gates to be closed at sunset on Friday. Those who camped outside the walls, waiting for the regulations to be ended to come in and begin their selling, he ordered driven away from the city. He didn't even want them to hang around outside. He required the Levites to cleanse themselves and to guard the gates so that no one would violate the Sabbath.

Like the people of Israel in Nehemiah's time, we are the people of God. Unlike the people of Israel in Nehemiah's time, we are Christians and not Jews. So, we have to answer one question: "Does God require Christians to keep the Sabbath?"

The New Testament nowhere commands believers to worship on the Sabbath. In fact, the New Testament seems to teach that any day is to be a day of worship (Romans 14:5-6). We may say that the New Testament prescribes no set day of worship. But the early Christians voluntarily set aside Sunday as the day of worship in honour of the resurrection of Christ

who rose on the first day of the week. That's why we call our Sunday as the Lord's Day.

Some preliminary conclusions we can draw are:

- The Lord's Day on Sunday is not the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday.
- The early Christians worshiped on Sunday to celebrate the resurrection of Christ.

The New Testament says nothing or little about what you should or should not do on Sunday.

In Jesus' day the rabbis made a list of some 1500 things you couldn't do on the Sabbath. The list included killing a flea that landed on your arm.

There are no directions given explicitly in the New Testament about how Christians are to observe Sunday. Therein is the great difference between the Jewish Sabbath and Christian Sunday.

- The Sabbath was given as a matter of law; Sunday is a day of grace.
- The Sabbath remembers creation; Sunday celebrates recreation (new life that the resurrected Christ brings).
- The Sabbath was a social force for a nation; Sunday is an individual day given to each Christian to celebrate as he sees fit.
- The Sabbath was governed by rules and regulations; Sunday is not bound by rules.

It may seem that there is no valid use for the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment to keep the Sabbath holy today. In fact, it might seem as if we ought instead to talk about the Nine Commandments—and drop the 4<sup>th</sup> one off the list.

But not so! We're not about to drop any of the commandments. They all have something to say to us today.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment was specifically given to the nation of Israel as a sign of its special relationship with God. But it is also true that the concept of the Sabbath goes all the way back to creation. Genesis 2:1-3 says, "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating he had done."

Note the divine pattern here—six days of work; one day of rest.

Looking at the pattern another way, this is what we see—work; rest.

Work comes first, followed always by rest. Work, then rest. This is the divine pattern of life.

Genesis 2:1-3 contains an important principle that transcends the law. God has established a certain rhythm to life. Man is not meant to work forever without a rest. God ordered the universe from the very beginning so that like the sounding of a clock, every seven days man would stop and rest and relax and gain perspective.

I take it that this is not only a spiritual principle, but also an emotional and physical principle. We need a day of rest, a break, a change of pace. That, it seems to me, is the enduring principle that is enshrined in the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment and called the Sabbath ("rest" in Hebrew).

The legal requirement is gone. We no longer live under the law. But the enduring principle remains. We need a day of rest. God made us that way.

God knew what He was doing when He "rested" on the 7<sup>th</sup> day. Was He tired? No. But He was establishing a universal pattern for the human race. We wear out and break down unless we have a day of rest.

The fact is this—in the Old Testament the Sabbath was not primarily a day of worship. It was primarily a day of rest.

With that in mind, let's now state the abiding principle of the 4th Commandment—we give 1 day in 7 to God because 7 out of 7 belong to Him!

Seen in that light, the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment is extremely relevant today. No, we don't keep a Sabbath in the Old Testament sense. Yes, we desperately need a weekly Sabbath and if we don't observe one, we will soon break down and begin to wear out.

God says, "Remember the Sabbath day." Why do we need to "remember" the Sabbath?

- Because we tend to forget it so easily.
- Because our work would soon control us otherwise.
- Because the Sabbath reminds us that there is more to life than a paycheck.
- Because families need time to come together.
- Because it is so easy to crowd God out of our lives.

In a very real sense the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment is God's Maintenance Commandment. It's His way of saying, "If you don't slow down, you're going to kill yourself." The Sabbath was never meant to be a burden around our necks. The Sabbath was originally God's gift to the human race.



The Sabbath is meant to take us back to Eden, back to life as it was meant to be. On the Sabbath we are set free from deadlines, demands, projects, payrolls, memos, timelines, and all the rest. On the Sabbath, we remember that what we are is more important than what we do. For six days each week we are judged on our performance. For one day out of seven we aren't judged at all.

The Sabbath says to us, “Stop! Remember! Think! Reflect! You are more than a performer. You are a person made in God’s image. That’s how you were born; that’s how you will die.”

One question remains: If Sunday is the Christian day of worship, how should we observe it since it is not the Sabbath— although we all need a weekly Sabbath? I have four suggestions for you.

- Get recharged on Sunday. For ancient Israel the Sabbath meant resting from the rigours of an agrarian lifestyle. For us today, it means we use the day to relax and unwind from the pressures of the week. Take a walk, read a book, enjoy a meal with friends, play some games, have some fun. Whatever helps you unwind and relax, do it. And don't feel guilty about it.
- Celebrate the Resurrection with other believers. Sunday ought to be the best day of the week because it's the day when you throw aside the mundane cares and the vexing problems and focus on the greatest miracle in all history—the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Sing! Clap! Celebrate! Rejoice! Let the people of God lift their voices in praise because Christ has risen indeed!
- Focus on your family. Take time to be with loved ones in your immediate and extended families, to pause and remember those who have passed on. Let it be a time to strengthen those relationships that mean the most to you.
- Do a good deed. This takes us back to the words of Jesus who rebuked the Pharisees because they criticized a man for pulling his sheep out of a ditch on the Sabbath. But if he left the sheep there, it would die. Jesus said, “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:12). How can we “do good” on Sunday? Visit the sick, phone a discouraged friend, have a lonely person over for dinner, share the gospel, give an offering to the poor. The willing heart will always find a thousand ways to do good.

The end of the matter is this—for the Christian, every day is Sunday. All seven days belong to the Lord. But we give God one day out of seven because He knows we need a break, a change, and a time to enjoy life. Ecclesiastes says “there is a time for every purpose under heaven ...” including a time for God and to enjoy His grace and goodness to us. And that’s the abiding, unchanging spirit of the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

Someone has said it this way: “Before Christ, men worked all week and then rested on Saturday. They worked to earn their rest. Now that Christ has risen from the dead, we rest on the first day of the week—because the work of salvation has been accomplished for us. Sunday is a day of grace. We receive that which we do not deserve. Sunday reminds us that we don’t have to work and strive to gain acceptance with God. It teaches us that in Jesus Christ— wholly apart from human works—we are accepted by God.”

It’s Sunday today. It’s time we take the grumpiness out of our lives and put the joy back in! Jesus lives! We’re set free! That’s what today is all about.

Why was Nehemiah so firm and harsh in making the Jews keep the Sabbath? It is because it was not only an act of enforcing obedience to the Law, but also an act of protecting their survival as the people of God. Nehemiah knew that no matter how strong the outward physical wall of Jerusalem was, the people would still succumb to their enemies if the inner spiritual wall of their relationship with God was weak. They must take and make time for the Sabbath to rest in the Shalom peace of their God, and to trust Him to be in control even when life stands still for them for a day.

## **Conclusion**

Nehemiah 13 reveals clearly the way evil works. It invades us quietly. Before we are aware of it we have compromised ourselves and gone along with standards widely accepted around. We must be prepared to take drastic and even painful action to clear up the things that are wrong in our own affairs. Many Christians are slow to act and that allows sin to take root in their lives.

Nehemiah called on God to remember him three times in Neh 13:14, 22b, 31b. He called on God not to blot out what he had so faithfully done, and to show him divine mercy and favour.

Indeed, God loves and remembers those who keep their promise to walk faithfully in His ways so that they can rest trustingly in His promise of mercy and favour upon them.

Like Nehemiah, let’s seek God to help us, individually and as a church, to remain faithful in our walk with Him so that we can stay restful in His care of us.