

## From Rubble to Return: Rebuilding with God's Time

Nehemiah 13:15-22

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Go ahead and grab the Bible from the pew in front of you, or open the one on your device. Today we are in Nehemiah chapter 13. If you are not sure where Nehemiah is you will find it just a bit to the left of the center of your Bible, before Esther, Job and Psalms.

Now today is the second last message in this series, and the second message in the three-part mini-series that comes at the end of Nehemiah.

So just to bring you up to speed again, Nehemiah was King Artaxerxes' wine taster in roughly 400BC. And at this time Israel has just spent 70 years in Babylonian captivity because of their disobedience to God's Law.

So way back in Deuteronomy, just before Moses died, he reminded the people of what it meant to live their lives to God's pleasure and glory. And in chapter 28 we get this famous list of blessings and curses that follow a life lived either with or separated from God.

So Moses says: "If you obey the LORD your God: you will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of our land and the young of your livestock... Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out."<sup>1</sup> And it goes on and on like this. God says joy is yours when you live your life in line with My commands.

But then it switches gears and says: "However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all His commands... all these curses will come on you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed.... The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies.... Your sons and daughters will be given to another nation, and you will wear out your eyes watching for them day after day, powerless to lift a hand.... The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your ancestors.... All these curses will come on you. They will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the LORD your God and observe the commands and decrees He gave you."<sup>2</sup>

So Israel lived under God's rule of Law which stipulated that blessing resided with obedience, while the consequences of disobedience would ultimately result in being expelled from the Promised Land.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 28:2-6

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 28:15-45

And this was the reality that Israel was living under. They'd disobeyed the Law and suffered the consequences.

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But now under King Artaxerxes God was giving them another chance – Isn't it great that we worship a God of second chances? And so God spoke to Artaxerxes and instructed him to let the people return to Jerusalem to rebuild their city and restart their religious ritual. And Nehemiah had played a key role in this.

So back in chapter one we watched Nehemiah foster God's heart in himself as he cared for people who were poor and oppressed and not like himself in many ways. So even though he was wealthy and 1200Km's away, when Nehemiah learned of the plight of those in Jerusalem he broke down and wept and fasted for days.

And we said while there is a lot of this story that is descriptive and so just describes the setting Nehemiah found himself in, fostering this kind of heart is prescriptive for us. If we are going to image Christ we need to develop His heart for the hurting – we need to care about people who aren't like us. And when we do this we image God.

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Another thing we saw that was prescriptive for us came when Nehemiah prayed and God opened his eyes – this is my favorite thing about Nehemiah. So while there are no miracles like the crossing of the Red Sea in this book – things everyone would agree are miracles – over and over again Nehemiah was able to perceive God's involvement in his situation. So he said things like: "because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests."<sup>3</sup> It was a miracle, but one that could be missed if he didn't have eyes to see it. We need to foster these kinds of eyes.

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So, the book started off with lots of success, but then reality began setting in. Nehemiah and the Jews began facing several different forms of opposition as they set out to put the vision for rebuilding Jerusalem into action. Some of this opposition came from outside the faith community, and other opposition came from inside – from people who were afraid about what might happen as the changes took place.

And again, we said this wasn't just for Nehemiah, this is for us. So, as Fort George prepares to put the values God has directed us towards into action we need to be aware that we are going to face opposition – Jesus promises that this is going to happen.

So, we shouldn't be surprised if, over the next couple years, as we put our plans into action some outside the Christian camp oppose us. This is what has happened to Trinity Western University and Ness Lake Bible Camp recently, and it could happen to us. So, we also shouldn't be surprised when opposition comes at us from outside.

But we also shouldn't be surprised when people among us rise up and resist. And this kind of opposition can be tricky because it comes from godly people who want to see the kingdom grow, but who are nervous and afraid.

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<sup>3</sup> Nehemiah 2:8

So the Jews who were living near Nehemiah told him over and over again, if you rebuild the walls our enemies are going to attack us.’<sup>4</sup> Now that was a possibility. Sanballat could have attacked. But he didn’t. And so the fear these Jews had was of something that could have happened in the future. But fear like this never comes from God. Satan is the author of the fear of the unknown. And so when opposition like this arises inside the camp we need to first encourage our brothers and sisters to have faith and put the future in God’s hands – we never know what will happen. But that doesn’t change what we must do. So second, we need to move forward in spite of the unknown.

Friends, the reality is that God isn’t disappointed when we set out to grow His kingdom and make mistakes in the process – it doesn’t phase Him – the only servants God opposes are those who do nothing with what He has given them. So we must put the resources and talents He has put at our disposal to work.

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In the end Nehemiah spent 12 years rebuilding and reforming Jerusalem. After this he returned to Artaxerxes to do a bit more wine tasting. But in chapter 13 we get an epilogue. Nehemiah is granted permission to head back to Jerusalem. But when he arrives he finds that without the constant vigilance of leadership God’s people quickly shifted their attention from the vertical – from living their lives to God’s glory – and onto the horizontal. And when this happened there was a rapid digression into some of the old sins that they had been guilty of before.

So last week we touched on the fact that if you are a person then your default is to revert to living your life in a way that does not please God. It doesn’t matter how long you have climbed towards Him, there is no such thing as coasting when it comes to pursuing Christ-likeness. As soon as vigilance stops, movement away from God begins.

So last week we looked at how God’s people had used their resources in a way that didn’t honour God. And this took the form of allowing God’s enemy, Tobiah, to take up residence in the Temple, in the room dedicated to collecting the offerings of the people.

And what resulted was that with Tobiah in the temple the people were unable to give to God.

Now some of this is descriptive. Today there is no temple, so the way and reasons for giving to God are different. But there is a principle behind this that is very relevant.

So Stats Canada says 93% of regular church attending people give money to charity – that’s great. But it also says that in 2010 the average amount given was \$1004. If you compare that to the average annual household income which was \$76,000 that means on average wealthy church attending Christians spend over 98% of our income on ourselves and our country (if you include tax), and only give away a shocking 1.3%.

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<sup>4</sup> Nehemiah 4:12

Now the reason for our stinginess with God is a bit complicated, but one factor in the equation is simply that we can't afford to give away more. And that's because we've let Tobiah into our temple. We've spent ourselves into the hole so far that there literally isn't any room in the average North American budget to give any more away.

So like in Nehemiah's day, God's people have failed to use God's resources to build God's kingdom.

The answer to the problem then is that we need to kick Tobiah out. It isn't that we need to make more money – we already have tons of money – it's that we need to spend less of our money on ourselves thereby freeing up resources that we can use to increase God's glory and expand His kingdom. Use God's money to honour God.

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The second issue the people had slumped back into while Nehemiah was gone was that they were failing to use the time God had allotted them to build God's kingdom.

So let's pick up the text in Nehemiah chapter 13 starting in verse 15.

[Read Nehemiah 13:15-22]

Now under the Old Covenant God's people were to rest one day in seven. They were to cease from all their labour, and reorient their lives around God. And so Nehemiah locks the gates of the city to bring the people back to this.

Now why was Sabbath such a big deal to Nehemiah?... Well the reason was that it was a big deal to God. But the reason it was a big deal to God was that He knew it was the best thing for His people. So God gave the people two reasons for why they were to obey the Sabbath. First, in Exodus 20 we read:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.... For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)

So God's people were to rest one day in seven as a way of imaging their God who had done the same. Now obviously God didn't need to rest after creation. He wasn't tired or burnt out. And yet He rested. He rested because He didn't need to keep striving, and because He knew this would be best for us. And so He gave the Jews Sabbath so they could image their Creator to their own benefit. Looking like God always brings people joy. And that's the first reason they were to rest on the Sabbath.

The second reason God gave the Jews for observing the Sabbath is found in Deuteronomy where we read:

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy... Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

So here God's people were to rest on day in seven as a way of remembering that their salvation came, not through their own effort, but through the effort of God. It wasn't their hard work that delivered them from Egypt, it was YHWH the Saviour who delivered them. And so they would stop working one day in seven in order to remind themselves that God was God.

But when Nehemiah returned the people weren't honouring the Sabbath. They were treading winepresses, bringing in grain, and conducting business. And so Nehemiah locked the gates. He forced them to image God – which always brings us joy – and to remember that it was by YHWH's work, not their own, that they were saved.

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Now throughout this series we've been looking at the descriptive and prescriptive elements of the story of Nehemiah. Some things just describe the world Nehemiah was living in, and other things prescribe the way we must live if we are going to please God.

And we need to tackle the topic of Sabbath with the same understanding. We need to know what elements of it are just descriptive and what are prescriptive for us. And Jesus brings this questions to the forefront in the Sermon on the Mount where He says: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."<sup>5</sup> But the question of what "to fulfill them" means is a little more difficult to nail down. But we are going to work on that today.

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Now, as we get into this I need to say that one aspect of Sabbath I'm not going to touch is the Saturday or Sunday debate. All I will say is that the early church shifted their Sabbath to the first day of the week in honour of Jesus' resurrection which happened on a Sunday. So whenever I say Sabbath, hear Sunday.

But there is another debate about Sabbath that is more important and where we are going to spend our time. So there are three perspectives within the Christian tradition as to what Jesus meant when He said He fulfilled the Law. Some believe Jesus's fulfillment of the Law is restricted to the political rules about Israel as a nation and the temple rules about sacrifices, which because of Jesus, no longer apply to us. But this camp believes that the rest of the Old Testament's 613 laws do apply. So Sabbath and dietary laws and even clothing rules are still morally binding.

A second group of Christians believes that Jesus' fulfillment of the law applies to all the laws of the Old Testament except God's moral code in the 10 Commandments. So the 10 Commandments still apply, but all the other laws don't.

Finally, other Christians believe that Jesus' fulfillment of the Law applies to all the laws of the Old Testament period. So even the 10 Commandments do not hold moral obligation over Christians like they did over the Jews.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:17

Now if you go online you can find lengthy arguments in favor and in opposition to each of these positions. I'm only going to talk about the one that the majority of the evangelical world embraces which seems to do the best job of holding the entire Biblical record together – and that is that when Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets that included everything in the Old Testament including the 10 Commandments. Christians are no longer bound by any of the Old Testament rules.

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Now as I say that I want to stop right there and tell you what I'm not saying. I'm not saying we throw out the Old Testament or the 10 Commandments. We've just spent 9 weeks looking at Nehemiah, and if I wanted to throw the Old Testament out I wouldn't have done this. And in a bit I'm going to tell you how we keep the 10 Commandments as a by-product of our devotion. But here is what I am saying: When Christians read the Old Testament Law we need to read it in light of the New Testament.

That means we need to find the prescriptive elements – those things that apply to us – and extract them from within the descriptive story of the Old Testament. And the way we do this – and we've done that this whole series – is by lining it up with the New Testament revelation. Where the Old Testament says the same thing the New Testament does it is prescriptive for us, but where there are changes the New Testament always trumps the Old – am I allowed to use “trump” like that still?

And The New Testament tells us that we are under a New Law. It is the Law of Love and the Law of the Spirit. So Paul, speaking to the Corinthians, said:

You show that you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... [God] has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Corinthians 3:3-6)

In this text, and actually the rest of the chapter, Paul compares and contrasts the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. And he says the Old came on tablets of stone – an obvious reference to the 10 Commandments – while the New comes, not by the letter of the Law, but by the Spirit who gives life. The Old Law was obeyed by doing every little thing written down, the New Law is obeyed by having God's Spirit inside us directing us to live in a way that pleases Him.

So again, without getting into this debate in any depth, the majority of the evangelical community, and I would lump myself here, believes that the entirety of the Old Testament Law holds no authority over us after Christ's fulfillment of it – We don't please God, or obtain favor from Him, by living our lives under that Law.<sup>6</sup>

Rather, and this is my thesis today: **Christians love God, and their neighbours, and themselves, with God's love, for God's pleasure, and their own joy.**

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this see: <https://gotquestions.org/abolish-fulfill-law.html> and <https://www.gci.org/bible/torah/exodus2a> (Accessed November 11, 2016)

And I'm basing this largely off the way Jesus interpreted the Law for the Pharisees when they asked "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

And Jesus responded:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40)

When Jesus says this He tells us how we are to live. And He didn't say, well the most important commandments are the 10, He said, everything in the Law hangs on, or is built upon the foundation, of loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself.

Now obviously if you are loving God then you aren't having any other god's before Him and you aren't using His name in vain. And if you are loving your neighbour then you aren't murdering them or committing adultery with their spouse.

But under the New Law it is even more than that. So in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made it clear that following the rules wasn't the point, rather what is important is living your life in line with the heart of God.

So Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. (Matthew 5:21-22)

So obedience to Jesus' New Law doesn't mean we don't do what the Old Law stipulated, in fact God's heart for us goes well beyond what the letter of the Old Law said.

So that's the Law and the 10 Commandments in general, but even with this understanding, the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment – to honour the Sabbath and keep it holy – poses some trouble to us. And that's because keeping the Sabbath has little to do with loving our neighbour, but it also doesn't have anything to do with loving God. I mean how is God loved when we don't work?

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The fact is we don't really know what to do with the Sabbath and so, like Mark Buchanan said at Cultivate this last weekend, the Sabbath has become the one command that we disregard. We don't make idols, at least we try not to, and we avoid murdering each other, but many of us don't honour the Sabbath. And we don't do this because we don't understand the heart of God behind it. We don't know what we are supposed to do with it in light of Jesus.

So how are we supposed to understand the Sabbath in light of Jesus?

Two things, first, we have to affirm that none of the Old Testament Law is morally binding over us; we are under the Law of grace through Christ and the Spirit. That means the way we please God has nothing to do with following rules, and everything to do with reflecting God's heart of love.

We get that. We get that we are to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. But the problem is we've seen that to be two commands, but there is a hint of a third.

So we are to love God with God's love – the only kind of love worthy of God is the kind that comes from Him by grace through the Spirit. Second we are to love our neighbours with God's love – we are to image God to them with the love Christ has poured into us. But third we are to love our neighbours *as ourselves*, which means we need to love ourselves with God's love.

And it is this third command that the Sabbath speaks to. So Jesus said:

The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath! (Mark 2:27-28 NLT)

Jesus is the Lord of Sabbath. He loves Sabbath, and used it to bring abundant life to people. So most of the miracles in the Gospels happened on the Sabbath.

And Jesus did this to convey the point that the Sabbath is for people. It's not about keeping rules, it's about receiving the gift of abundant life from God. The Sabbath is the way we receive God's love. And as such, while the rule is obsolete, the heart behind the Old Testament Sabbath is still prescriptive.

So back in Exodus and Deuteronomy when God told the people why they were to keep the Sabbath it wasn't for God, it was for them. God knew that if the people would work perpetually they would lose sight of who He was and who He made them to be. And so He gave them the gift of Sabbath so that they would experience the joy that comes from imaging Him, and remember that His work, not their own, was the source of their deliverance from bondage. God gave them Sabbath as a gift of grace.

Now, understood in this way, the Sabbath has the same prescriptive value for us as the other 9 Commands. So we aren't obliged to keep any of them to earn God's favor, but because we love God with the love Jesus has put in our heart, we find ourselves not having any other gods, or making idols or using His name in vain.

And similarly, because we love our neighbours we don't steal or covet their stuff or bear false testimony against them. And we do this, not because we are obeying the Law, but because Jesus has filled us with a love for God and our neighbours.

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But in the same way then, because we love ourselves with Christ's love, or you could say "because we have received Christ's love for us", the by-product is living our life in a way that ourselves. Therefore people who've been saved, who have received the love of Jesus, are people who honour the Sabbath.

Now they don't work 7 days a week because of the rule, they don't work like this because they image a God who rests. And they don't work like this to remind themselves that it is only God's work that saves. Their work doesn't earn anything from Him so they can stop it. And ultimately they don't work like this because they have received God's love and love themselves. The result is they Sabbath to their joy.

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Now practically Sabbath is going to look different for different people because there aren't any rules about it that apply to us. But just like a Christian wouldn't understand what it meant to love God or love people if they were asking "Do I really need to avoid killing people?" Or "Can I worship two gods?" In the same way if you are asking "Do I have to keep the Sabbath?" You don't understand what it means to love yourself with God's love.

Friends, Sabbath is a gift from God. It's a grace. God didn't make you for Sabbath, He made the Sabbath for you. But the thought of rejecting God's gifts should make you squirm.

The Pharisees did this – they didn't want Jesus' salvation, so they missed out on it. It's people who receive God's gifts, like children, that are saved.

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So brothers and sisters, there are no rules that you have to follow about what you can and can't do on the Sabbath. But the rules aren't the point – don't talk about that – the grace is the point. So the prescription here for us is to embrace God's gift because that is how we please God and experience our own joy, both now and for eternity.

So take one day in seven and ask yourself, what can I do today to better image God, and what will help me remember that I'm not Him – YHWH is God, and it is His work that saves me.

Friends, the heart of God for your joy, is that we use one day in seven to do something different. If you are in the office all week then go for a walk in Creation. Come to church. Stop working to provide for yourself. Instead trust in God your Provider. And don't do this because you have to, do it because you get to. Your God has given you the gift of Sabbath that enables you to love yourself with His love.