

Henry Ow
 HCC Sermon – 2024/05/05
 Nehemiah 13:4-31

Sermon Outline

INTRODUCTION

1. Image: One would think that after experiencing God's faithfulness these past seven years of writing sermons, the experience would be easier.
2. Need: An experience of God's faithfulness does not produce lasting faithfulness to God.
3. Subject: How do we cultivate a lasting faithfulness to God after experiencing God's faithfulness?
4. Text: Nehemiah 13:4-31
5. Preview: We'll look at a case study, a lesson, and action.

BODY

- I. [Case Study] The returnees lapsed in their faithfulness to God even though God faithfully helped them rebuild the wall of Jerusalem.
 - A. The returnees lapsed in their support of the work of the temple (13:4-14)
 - B. The returnees lapsed in their observation of the Sabbath (13:15-22)
 - C. The returnees lapsed in their marital practices (13:23-31)
- II. [Lesson] We lapse in our faithfulness to God because we are prone to wander.
 - A. We are prone to prioritize the building of our kingdom rather than God's kingdom (13:4-14)
 - B. We are prone to overwork rather than rest in God (13:15-22)
 - C. We are prone to pursue relationships of our own design rather than God's design (13:23-31)
- III. [Action] Seek God's help to always reform so that we would be faithful to Him.
 - A. Nehemiah sought God's help by praying (13:14, 22, 29, 31)
 - B. Nehemiah recognizes only God can bring about faithfulness (13:14, 22, 29, 31)
 - C. Pray for God to help us seek reformation in ourselves and others, so that we would be faithful to him.

CONCLUSION

1. Summary: Case Study. The returnees lapsed in their faithfulness to God even though God faithfully helped them rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Lesson. We lapse in our faithfulness to God because we are prone to wander. Action. Seek God's help to cultivate an ongoing faithfulness to him.
2. Closing Image: A woman sung to a downtrodden Robert Robinson his own song: Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing not knowing he had written it.

MANUSCRIPT

One would think that after experiencing God's faithfulness these past seven years of writing sermons, the experience in writing sermons would be easier. God has always helped me to finish a sermon every time. But sermon writing causes my flesh to surface. I find myself worrying every time I prepare to preach. Will I have enough time to study? Will I understand the passage? How do I communicate it in a way that's helpful? I fail to be present with my family. Josephine describes it as my sermon mode. She finds me staring off into corner of our dining room when we eat. Instead of focusing on my family and dinner, I'm focused on wordsmithing main points. Earth to Henry. Sometimes, I find myself snapping at family internally and externally. Another Diaper? Milk Again? Mom, why are you calling now? Worry. Lack of Presence. Curtness. Me. (Point to self) Fleshly. Even though God has faithfully helped me in the past, I struggle with being faithful to him in the present.

For those of you married to someone who prepares a Bible study, sermon-based study, sermon, or Sunday school lesson probably understand what I'm saying. Now this applies not only to ministry, but it applies to other aspects of life too. **An experience of God's faithfulness does not produce lasting faithfulness to God.** Think about it. God faithfully provides for you a spouse. You think to yourself: I'll never struggle with jealousy again. But years into your marriage, you find yourself checking your wife's social media account for any contact with ex-boyfriends. God faithfully provides for you the means to retire. You think I can finally breathe a sigh of relief. But you find yourself worrying: "Do I have enough with a rising inflation rate?" You constantly check your retirement accounts. God faithfully allows you to enter the school of your choice. College. Medical School.

Graduate school. You think yourself: I can sigh a relief. A semester into your study when things get tough, you wonder to yourself: “God! Why did you bring me here? I can’t do it!”.

We struggle to be faithful to God even though we experience his faithfulness.

If an experience of God’s faithfulness doesn’t produce a lasting faithfulness to Him, then what should we do? If we have experienced God provide in the past (provision of a home, healing, a restored relationship, relief from debt), then how do we continue to follow him rather than falter in our walks? **How do we cultivate a lasting faithfulness to God after experiencing his faithfulness in our lives?**

To answer this question, we’ll turn to a story of God’s people who experienced God’s faithfulness but failed to be faithful. We’ll look at a narrative within the book of Nehemiah. The book begins with the wall of Jerusalem in ruins. But God raises up Nehemiah to mobilize a construction effort. Despite strong opposition, the returnees with God’s help rebuild the wall in 52 days. The returnees commit themselves to follow the Lord. They dedicate the wall. Happily, Ever After! The End! Or you would think. But there’s a flashback of sorts in Nehemiah. It describes what the returnees do after they experience God’s faithfulness to rebuild the wall.

That’s where we’ll be this morning. If you’re not there already, then please turn to Nehemiah, chapter 13. Thank you, Akhil, for reading this morning’s passage. We’ll look specifically at verses four thru thirty-one. Nehemiah, chapter 13, verse 4 thru 31.

This morning, we’ll look at three things. First, we’ll look at the case study presented. An account. A report. A journal entry. Second, we’ll think about the lesson that we can

learn from it. A message. A precept. Third, we'll look at an action step. Something for us to consider doing. A practice. Something to do. Again, three parts. **Case study. A lesson. An action.**

Let's look first at the case study presented in the text. What does Nehemiah record happen after the returnees laid the last stone to the wall? How does his journal entry read?

The returnees lapsed in their faithfulness to God even though God faithfully helped them rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. The post-exilic community fails to uphold their covenant with God. They break their word. A rebuilt wall does not result in a reformed people obeying God. Instead, they disobey. They break the Mosaic law. **The returnees lapsed in their faithfulness to God even though God faithfully helped them rebuild the wall of Jerusalem.**

The returnees lapsed in three ways. They broke three broad covenant stipulations. They violate the Mosaic law in three ways.

First, **the returnees lapsed in their support of the work of the temple.** They failed to uphold the laws regarding temple. Nehemiah records two infractions that the returnees committed against the temple. Two violations. Two transgressions.

First, **they desecrated the temple by allowing Tobiah to store his stuff there.** Look at verse 4. *Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels,*

and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

The temple's facility director, Eliahshib, moves all the provisions designated for temple worship and care for the Levites out. He allows Tobiah, a pagan, an Ammonite, to put his stuff there instead. Per the law, priest could only store things designated for temple worship and care of the priests in the temple. Any other item would make the temple unclean. Unholy. Desecrated.

First infraction. They desecrated the temple. It was no longer set apart. Second infraction. They failed to give a tithe. They neglected to give a portion of their income to the work of the temple. They withheld their harvest from the priests. Look at verse 10. *I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. So I confronted the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?"*

Since the people failed to give a tithe, the Levites lacked adequate provisions to survive and the resources to carry out worship at the temple. What do you do if you're hungry? You find yourself some work, so that you can get some food. It shouldn't surprise us that the Levites and priests left the temple to work their fields. No one stuck around the temple. When Nehemiah visited the temple, he found the premises vacated. A ghost town. Empty. He hears the echo of his voice. Shalom. Shalom. Shalom. He asks: *"Why is the house of God forsaken?"* Why has it been abandoned? The answer. The returnees failed to give a tithe.

Now a tithe is a portion of income set aside for the work of the temple. Earlier in the book of Nehemiah, he records the people making a commitment to give a third part of a shekel to the service of the house of God (Neh 10:32). They also promise the first fruits of their harvest (10:35). Whatever we gather on the first day of harvest season, it belongs to the temple. Grapes. Figs. Olives. Wheat. Barley. Whatever we harvest first, we will give to God.

If the temple is desecrated and no one is there to organize the temple worship, then how would Israel make atonement for their sins? How would they worship God? How could the nations meet with God if there's no one to greet them at the temple? The desecration of the temple and withholding of the tithe prevented the priests and Levites from bringing people to God. It undermined work in the temple.

First lapse. The returnees lapsed in their support of the work of the temple. Let's look at the second lapse. What other covenant stipulation did they break?

The returnees lapsed in their observation of the Sabbath. Instead of setting aside a day to rest and worship God. They worked. They bought and sold goods. Look at verse 15. *In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day.*

Per the Mosaic law, God commanded Israel to set aside the seventh day of the week to rest (Exodus 20:8-11). This meant no work from sundown on Friday till sundown on Saturday. God cites a failure to keep a sabbath as one of the reasons why he expelled Israel

from the land (Amos 8:5; Jer 17:21-22). After Israel returns to the land, they commit themselves to observe a Sabbath (10:31). But here we are again. Israel violates the command to observe a Sabbath.

Two infractions. One. Lapse in supporting temple work. Two. Lapse in observing a Sabbath. Let's talk about the last infraction.

The returnees lapsed in their marital practices. They married inhabitants of the land. They intermarried with people God prohibited. Look at verse 23. *In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people.*

When they people returned from exile, Ezra prohibited them from marrying the inhabitants of the land (Ezra 9:1-2). Nehemiah records the people commit themselves not to intermarry with the inhabitants of the land (10:30). But they reneged on their commitment.

Now you think the intermarriage problem was limited to the commoners. The farmer. The fishermen. The carpenter. Nope. This intermarriage problem even affected the priesthood. Look at verse 28. *And one of the sons of Jehoida, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite.* The high priest's grandson intermarried with an inhabitant of the land. Per the Mosaic law, priests could only marry within the tribe of Levi (Lev 21:14) to ensure that only a Levite would serve a high priest.

Now not only a non-Levite but a non-Israelite could potentially become a high priest of Israel.

The returnees lapsed in their faithfulness to God in three ways. They lapsed in their support of the work of the temple. They lapsed in their observation of the Sabbath. They lapsed in their marital practices.

What can we learn from this case study? What can we learn from their mistake? What is the takeaway?

We are prone to lapse in our faithfulness to God because we are prone to wander. We fail to follow God because we find ourselves following the desires of our flesh. We prefer sin to holiness. We prefer our way to God's way. We'd rather follow the playbook of the world rather than God's playbook. We have a bent to move away from God rather than toward him. **We are prone to lapse in our faithfulness to God because we are prone to wander.**

Based on the text, I think we're prone to wander in three ways. First, **we are prone to prioritize the building of our kingdom rather than God's kingdom.** The returnees to Israel withheld their support of the temple. They prioritized their homes, their farms, their orchards, their vineyards, and their shops instead of making God's name known to the nations.

Are we so different? God no longer uses a come and see model. The nations would come to Jerusalem to see God. Now we have a go and show model. God calls all of us as

believers to go and share the gospel with others. Do we as a church mobilize all our skills, our experiences, our time, our resources to further God's kingdom?

Can you imagine what it would be like if every person at our church leveraged our resources to further God's kingdom?

Let me give you an example. When I was on sabbatical, a missionary couple shared with me that one of their biggest needs are people to help minister to kids as missionaries are trained to serve their target people group. This summer, Sean and Jesse will be leading a team to do just this. Their team will help conduct a kid's program for kids of missionaries in the Mekong field while missionaries receive training. It's a two-week long trip. They need people who will pray for them. Financially support them. But they also need people who will go with them. Going though is not cheap. It requires sacrifice. You may need to give up the only two weeks of vacation you have to go. You won't be able to go on that trip to Hawaii with your friends. You'll need to skip that Disneyworld trip. No cruise to Cancun this year.

But imagine this. You take two weeks off. You go on this mission trip to serve kids. It might be difficult. A kid spills paint on your shirt. They run their sticky hands through your hair when they carry them. You deal with hot humid weather. You find yourself on the menu for local mosquitos. The food upsets your stomach. But you have a chance to share the gospel with a kid who grew up as a missionary kid. They hear their parents talk about the gospel. Their churches talk about the gospel. But it required them to see someone so moved by the gospel that they would travel thousands of miles to spend two weeks with them and love on them before they would believe. Now you may think. Big deal. One kid.

One conversion. What if that child because of that gospel conversation later in life decides to dedicate their life to be a missionary? Kingdom Impact. Or would you prefer to go to Hawaii so that you can snap a photo to post on your Instagram account to make your followers wish they were there? Or would you prefer to go again to Disneyworld to spend hundreds of dollars to stand 1.5 hours in line to ride a 60 second ride to get a thrill?

Do we think about how we might be able to devote our resources and time to God's kingdom? Or do we think about how can I benefit myself, my hobbies, my bucket list, or my leisure?

First way, we are prone to wander. **We are prone to prioritize the building of our kingdom rather than God's kingdom.** Let's think about the second way we are prone to wander. Second, we are prone to overwork rather than rest in God.

But God did not create us to work without ceasing. You cannot work 15-hour shifts everyday for months or years. You will tire. Your body will fall ill. God made us to work and to rest. It's part of our design. Hence, God instructs Israel to observe a Sabbath day.

Now as new covenant believers who have been saved by the work of Christ, we might say: we do not need to observe a Sabbath. But I would argue that God made us for a Sabbath. To take a day to rest from income producing work demonstrates that we trust not in our work to care for us. We trust in God who saved us will also provide for us our daily bread.

Some of you might think taking a Sabbath sounds great. Vacation here we come. Not so fast. Think about why God expects us to take a break from income producing work. One

aspect is leisure. But that's not all. God expects us to rest from work so that we might worship Him. Rest gives an opportunity catch a breath and cultivate a relationship with Him.

In this country, we have the privilege of taking two days off. This allows us to dedicate one day to rest and enjoy God's creation. It also allows us to dedicate another day to worship God and serve others. Do we do this? Do we make this a regular habit? Or do we decide to schedule project meetings for Sunday mornings? Do we decide to schedule our kid's extracurriculars for Sunday mornings? Or do we trust that even if we don't have a project meeting on Sunday, God will help me get the project done? Do we trust that even if my kids are not able to play on a Sunday morning basketball team, they will still be able to get into a good college? Do we rest in our works or rest in God? Are we prone to wander?

We covered two ways we're prone to wander. Prone to prioritize the building of our own kingdom rather than God's kingdom. Prone to overwork rather than rest in God. Let's talk about the third way that we're prone to wander.

We are prone to pursue relationships of our own design rather than God's design. If you recall the issue with the returnees intermarrying is national identity. If the Jews intermarried with their neighbors, they might no longer be Jewish. But the more important concern is that these marriages would lead the Israelites away from God.

God prohibits Israel from marrying an inhabitant of the land. But Rahab, a Canaanite, married an Israelite. In fact, we know this because she shows up in the genealogy of Jesus. God prohibits marriage to Moabites. But think about the most famous

Moabite woman in the Bible. Ruth. She marries Boaz and one of their future descendants is David, the king of Israel. Even the Old Testament doesn't prohibit marriage to other ethnicities if they shared faith in God. This is true even for us. Mixed couples should breathe easy.

But it is an issue when believers decide to pursue a relationship with non-believers. Look at the example that Nehemiah cites. He cites Solomon. Look at verse 26. *Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.* If Solomon the wisest person on earth walked away from God because of his marriage to a non-believing spouse, then what makes you think that you would be able to do better?

We feel tempted to date a non-believer because compared to believers this non-believer has more virtue. When we see a person stranded on the side of the road, he suggests that we pull over to help. He knows how to hold a conversation. He asks me questions to know me better. He spends his time on weekends building home for low-income communities. Did I mention he's good looking? I mean Korean super star good looking.

I might agree with you that compared to other Christian brothers this guy might be better in every way. But if you get married, then he will have a say on how to use your finances. He might veto your plan to set aside money to support gospel work. When you get married, he will influence how you decide to use your home. You want to host your small

group. But he doesn't like it. He might not like how much time you spend at church and with other believers. This will lead to tension. Will you follow his lead or God's lead? It will affect the way you follow the Lord.

Or do you choose to trust in God's design for relationship? This might mean being single for longer than you expect. But you demonstrate that you love God more by following his plans. No love I receive in a relationship will ever surpass God's love for me.

We're tempted to wander in three ways. Prone to prioritize our own kingdom. Prone to overwork. Prone to pursue relationships according to our design.

Why do we feel this tension? Why do we wrestle with doing things God's way versus our way? Why do we feel conflicted?

It's the flesh. Though Christ has paid the penalty for our sin and rescued us from the power of sin, the presence of sin remains. It still influences the way that we think. It affects the way that we see things. It causes us to wonder: "Did God really say? Is God's plan truly better?" And the flesh will remain until Christ returns so that we would receive resurrected bodies like his. Until then, we will find ourselves prone to wander.

What then should we do? What action can we take? If an experience of God's faithfulness cannot make us more obedient, then what hope do we have? What can we do if we find ourselves wandering from the fold of God?

Seek God's help to always reform so that we would be faithful to him. We lack the resources to follow God. But God is able. He alone can enable us to change. He alone

can reshape us. He alone can reform us. He performs this transforming work so that we might be more faithful to him. But we need to ask him for help. We need to seek it out. **Seek God's help to always reform so that we would be faithful to him.**

Nehemiah sought God's help by praying. He prays four times in this text. First time occurs in verse 14. *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 his service.* Second time is in verse 22. *Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.* Third time is in verse 29. *Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.* Fourth time in verse 31. *Remember me, O my God, for good.*

Yes. Nehemiah acted. He removed Tobiah's stuff from the temple and reconsecrated the space. He commanded Israel to recommit themselves to a tithe. He closes the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath so that no commerce occurs. He shames those who married foreigners and expelled the high priest's grandson. Yet these are only momentary measures. They address a surface problem.

Nehemiah recognizes that only God can bring about faithfulness within the people of Israel. This causes him to tell God: remember what I did. The implication. I can't change these people. Only you can change them. Look again at verse 14. *Do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done.* In other words, do not negate these efforts that I have taken to lead the returnees to covenant faithfulness. Ensure that this work will bear fruit.

If that's the case, then we need to pray. **Pray for God to help us seek reformation in ourselves and others, so that we might be faithful to him.** We need to pray individually, but we also need to pray together.

I don't know if you know this, but there's a group that gathers on Sunday mornings at 8:30am to pray for the welfare of the church. If we truly then want to be a church that is always reforming to be more like Christ, then what would happen if we prayed together? Maybe God will help marriages grow stronger. Maybe God will use our church to bring more people to Christ. Maybe God will help those who are spiritually dry feel spiritually revived. But are we willing to pray for God to do these things individually and corporately?

This morning, we looked a case study. The returnees lapsed in their faithfulness to God even though God faithfully helped them rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. We then looked a lesson. We lapse in our faithfulness to God because we are prone to wander. Lastly, we thought about an action that we can take. Seek God's help to cultivate an ongoing faithfulness to Him.

The Methodist preacher Robert Robinson wrote the hymn Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing for a sermon on Pentecost Sunday. But this powerful preacher struggled in his walk with the Lord. Some believe that he walked away from God later in life.

There is an apocryphal story of him sharing a carriage ride with a woman. The woman sought to break the silence by singing "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing".

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it.

Prone to leave the God I love;

Here's my heart, O take and seal it,

Seal it for Thy courts above.

After singing the hymn, she asks him: "What do you think?" He responds: "Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, I would give a thousand words if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then." May the Lord help us when we feel prone to wander to reform us so that we might follow him.