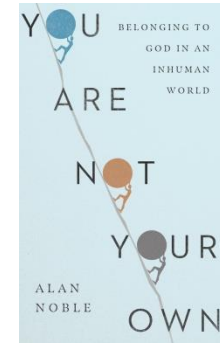


In this series, Re-Visioning: Pursuing God’s Purpose Through Fresh Eyes. We have drawn valuable principles and practical lessons from Nehemiah as we continue in our discerning process of God’s purpose for Cornerstone.

Nehemiah was a cup bearer to the Persian King; he was an exiled Jew who had risen to high office and led the 3rd wave of Jews returning to Jerusalem from the Babylon, to rebuild the walls and the people’s faith in 445.

Nehemiah 1–6 recalls the reconstruction of the wall, 7-13 deal with the renewal and purification of God’s people. Nehemiah 12 celebrates the dedication of the walls and it would have been a great ending of the book. But why ends with a sobering note of community reforms in Neh. 13? From what we have learnt from Nehemiah, the essential message isn’t about leadership or achieving a worthy assignment but this:

**Who and whose we are should bring lasting value and life transformation.**



Alan Noble’s book, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World*, writes:

Belonging necessitates limits. The question is to whom we belong. If we belong to ourselves, then we set our own limits – which means we have no limits except our own will. If we belong to God, then knowing and abiding by His limits enables us to live as we were created to live, as the human He designs us to be.<sup>1</sup>

This captures humanity’s desire for autonomy over against God’s intention for every image-bearer since the Garden of Eden and offers a great perspective to frame the ending of the book of Nehemiah.

We read in Neh. 10:28-29 that the leaders and everyone pledge their commitment to obey all the commands, regulations, and decrees of the LORD our Lord:

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Noble’s book, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World*, p. 118.

We promise not to let our daughters marry the pagan people of the land, and not to let our sons marry their daughters. (10:30 NLT)

We also promise that if the people of the land should bring any merchandise or grain to be sold on the Sabbath or on any other holy day, we will refuse to buy it. (10:31 NLT)

We promise together not to neglect the Temple of our God. (10:39b NLT)

But in Neh. 13 we read about what Nehemiah discovers after he returns to Jerusalem 12 yrs. later – the people have broken their promises and failed in every count of their pledges. The people’s lack of faithfulness expresses in three areas:

#### Worship

Eliashib the priest, who had been appointed as supervisor of the storerooms of the Temple of our God and who was also a relative of Tobiah, had converted a large storage room and placed it at Tobiah’s disposal. The room had previously been used for storing the grain offerings, the frankincense, various articles for the Temple, and the tithes of grain, new wine, and olive oil ... When I arrived back in Jerusalem, I learned about Eliashib’s evil deed in providing Tobiah with a room in the courtyards of the Temple of God ... I also discovered that the Levites

had not been given their prescribed portions of food, so they and the singers who were to conduct the worship services had all returned to work their fields. (13:4, 5, 7 NLT)

The people’s worship of God is defiled by the people’s tolerance of anti-God liaison and self-serving power politics and poor resource stewardship (vv. 4-10).

#### Sabbath keeping

In those days I saw men of Judah treading out their winepresses on the Sabbath. They were also bringing in grain, loading it on donkeys, and bringing their wine, grapes, figs, and all sorts of produce to Jerusalem to sell on the Sabbath. Some men from Tyre, who lived in Jerusalem, were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise. They were selling it on the Sabbath to the people of Judah—and in Jerusalem at that! (13:15-16 NLT)

Sabbath is defiled by business practices and profiteering (vv. 15-22).

#### Faith legacy

About the same time I realized that some of the men of Judah had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Furthermore, half their children spoke the

language of Ashdod or of some other people and could not speak the language of Judah at all. (13: 23-24 NLT)

Their faith heritage and legacy is defiled by faith-eroding relationships and idolatrous influence.

This is such a sobering snapshot of the people living totally contrary to their previous pledge of obedience to God's laws.

We see a reflection of fallen humanity's leaning to deviate from pursuing God's will.

As a people belonging to God and called to bless other nations, their pledge of obedience should be the mark of identity. Nehemiah has to confront their unfaithfulness and enforce further reforms.

Now, let me give you the only ONE point of today's message:

**The crucible of God-honouring life is the flourishing faith of His people, not merely a flash-in-the-pan allegiance.**

Any initial "Yes" is worth nothing without consistent follow through.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Neh. 2:10, 19; 4:1; 13:28. "Assuming this Tobiah to be Nehemiah's inveterate opponent last encountered in Neh 6, Nehemiah's cause for concern is entirely understandable. Quite apart from the misuse of the temple's estate, Tobiah's presence at the heart of the community's sacred space seems likely to have been an

So let's draw 3 practical community and personal applications from Nehemiah's responses to the situation.

**1. Worship in spirit and in truth - put away any personal agenda and practice God-honouring stewardship for community building.**

I became very upset and threw all of Tobiah's belongings out of the room. Then I demanded that the rooms be purified, and I brought back the articles for God's Temple, the grain offerings, and the frankincense ... I called all the Levites back again and restored them to their proper duties.<sup>12</sup> And once more all the people of Judah began bringing their tithes of grain, new wine, and olive oil to the Temple storerooms. I assigned supervisors for the storerooms ..." (13:8-9 NLT)<sup>2</sup>

If we decide to follow God's word out of personal preference or selfish ambitions to provide religious capital for our gain or influence, we will soon face a breaking point where our desire comes up against God's will.

If we belong to ourselves, then it would be foolish to deny ourselves. But if we are not our own and we belong to God, then we must decide consistently whom we are

attempt to integrate Jewish concerns within the wider network of Ammonite, Moabite, and Samaritan interests." (Shepherd, David J.; Wright, Christopher J. H., *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 103.)

worshipping because idolatry is betraying our belonging to God.<sup>3</sup>

Here we are challenged to ...

**Identify whatever or whoever has contaminated our corporate and personal worship; put away the stuff or people who have held us back to serve as living sacrifice.**<sup>4</sup>

**2. Deepen our trust in God's shepherding care - wisely redeem our time for soul care.**<sup>5</sup>

So I confronted the nobles of Judah. "Why are you profaning the Sabbath in this evil way?" I asked ... Then I commanded that the gates of Jerusalem should be shut as darkness fell every Friday evening, not to be opened until the Sabbath ended ... Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and to guard the gates in order to preserve the holiness of the Sabbath. (13:17, 19, 22 NLT)

The Sabbath is protected space in which God's people meditate on the mercies of God – a deliberate, set apart time to enjoy God rather than a legalistic religious practice

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Alan Noble's book, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World*, p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 12:1ff.

or an extra day to make profits or to ensure a secure, comfortable future.

The concern for the Sabbath is for the people to use God's gift of freedom to trust God's providential care and to steward their time for soul care.

We can easily rationalize why we put our pursuits, pleasures, and plans ahead of God's agenda. But consider carefully the penetrating words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

**Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.**<sup>6</sup>

**3. Guard our faith legacy by being mindful of our emotional attachments to faith-eroding relationships.**

So I confronted them and called down curses on them .... I made them swear in the name of God that they would not let their children intermarry with the pagan people of the land. (13:25 NLT)

Nehemiah stresses again that mixed marriages continue to erode the people's relationship with God.

Since Hebrew is the language of Torah and prayer, the loss of the Hebrew language underlines that anti-God influences

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Eph. 5:16-17.

<sup>6</sup> <https://thesovereign.wordpress.com/2014/06/02/temptation-and-forgetfulness-of-god-dietrich-bonhoeffer>

are watering down the faith of the Jewish people and their faith legacy.<sup>7</sup>

Derek Kidner notes that the loss of the Hebrew language would mean “a steady erosion of Israelite identity at the level of all thinking and expression.”<sup>8</sup>

As Pastor Steve reminded us last week, the commitment not to intermarry with pagans has nothing to do with excluding other nations but everything to do with the people’s commitment to the one true God, thus maintaining an uncompromised testimony as a missionary people.

If a relationship controls our emotions and shapes our hearts to love rival gods instead of the One for whom we were made, then we, like the frog in the slowly boiling pot, have lost our vigilance to think biblically and to live out our identity as Jesus followers.

We must keep in this mind:

**There is never a day when we can stop the work of restoration and renewal of our spirits.**

Nehemiah’s message is that it is easy to spiritually crash from coasting. It is so easy and subtle to relax revert back to faith-eroding and harmful habits.<sup>9</sup>

And each time when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are reminded to remember who and whose we are; each day we depend on God’s grace to grow in our journey of faith; each time we fall the lord is there to forgive and lift us up, to start again, even if it’s three steps forward and two steps back!

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<sup>7</sup> “Language is an emotive indicator of cultural identity ... Hebrew had religious importance because it was the language of Torah and prayer.” (Leslie Allen and T. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 164.)

<sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 131.

<sup>9</sup> Brent Kercheville, “Nehemiah 13, Crashing From Coasting,” <https://westpalmbeachchurchofchrist.com/old-testament/ezra-nehemiah/crashing-from-coasting.html>