

God Turns a Curse into a Blessing

Nehemiah 13:1-9

Nehemiah 13:1-9 - *“On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God, ² because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. ³ So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel. ⁴ Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, was allied with Tobiah. ⁵ And he had prepared for him a large room, where previously they had stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, the tithes of grain, the new wine and oil, which were commanded to be given to the Levites and singers and gatekeepers, and the offerings for the priests. ⁶ But during all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Then after certain days I obtained leave from the king, ⁷ and I came to Jerusalem and discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. ⁸ And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room. ⁹ Then I commanded them to cleanse the rooms; and I brought back into them the articles of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.”*

Background Notes

Nehemiah 12 is the account of the dedication of the newly rebuilt wall of Jerusalem. It was a time of revival, commitment to the Lord, and great rejoicing. But now in Nehemiah 13 we're back to reading about "Tobiah" - of all people! Do you remember Tobiah? He was one of the Israel's enemies who tried to hinder the reconstruction of the wall of Jerusalem. And now we find him actually living in the Temple area!

In addition we read of intermarriage of God's people with Ammonites and Moabites! Intermarriage with pagan peoples was strictly forbidden in God's Law (Deuteronomy 23). And as we read on through chapter 13 we'll see many other problems. What was going on? Where did all these problems come from? Did they just suddenly pop up?

The key to understanding why things had gone downhill is found in verse 6: *“But during all this I was not in Jerusalem.”* Nehemiah wasn't there! Comparing the date in verse 6 – *“the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon”* - with the date in Nehemiah 1:1, we see that more than 12 years had gone by since the wall was rebuilt. (By the way - why was Artaxerxes, a Persian king, called the “king of Babylon”? Reason: when the Persian Empire came to power, they took over the Babylonian Empire.)

Remember, Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the Persian emperor, Artaxerxes I. He was a godly Jew who was greatly concerned that the city walls of Jerusalem had lain in ruins for almost 150 years. So Nehemiah asked Artaxerxes for permission to go to Jerusalem and lead a wall-building effort, and the king actually appointed him as governor over the

province of Judah. (At that time Judah was a province in the Persian Empire.) Under the godly leadership of Nehemiah, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in just 52 days! This great feat triggered a revival and a time of great blessing. The people determined to keep all the commandments of the Lord, and they even wrote up and signed a commitment contract - committing themselves to obey God's Law (chapter 10).

All the events of Nehemiah 1-12 took place in the year 445BC. Nehemiah stayed on as governor in Judah for twelve years. Then he returned to the court of the king of Persia. He may have resumed his position as cupbearer and personal advisor to Artaxerxes I.

During Nehemiah's absence, the people began to backslide. Perhaps the problems started before Nehemiah left, but in any case, Nehemiah was motivated to return to Jerusalem for a second term as governor. We don't know if he went because he heard about the problems or the exact year of his return, but as soon as he returned, he began to get the situation straightened out. As a strong spiritual leader, Nehemiah didn't hesitate to get things turned around in the right direction.

Doctrinal Points

1. Without strong spiritual leadership, the people go backwards.

Remember what happened in the book of Exodus when Moses went up to meet the Lord on Mt. Sinai, and was away from the camp of Israel for forty days? The people quickly spiraled down into spiritual disaster. They actually persuaded Aaron to make a calf of gold; then they worshiped the image, saying that **this inanimate calf** was the god that delivered them from Egypt! Why? There was no strong spiritual leadership in the camp.

Here we see exactly the same thing. Nehemiah was away from Jerusalem, and the people quickly went into a spiritual decline. When Nehemiah was there the people were held in check - but when he was gone they went downhill. When I was preparing, I almost named this doctrinal point: "When the cat's away, the mice will play"! It's very true.

The situation was so bad that Tobiah, one of Israel's enemies, actually had an apartment and was living in the temple courts. And, of all things, the high priest had actually prepared the apartment for Tobiah! This high priest is the same Eliashib who worked on the wall in Nehemiah 3:1. Now, in some unknown way, he had formed an alliance with Tobiah. Maybe they had become allied by marriage. Nehemiah 6 tells us that both Tobiah and his son married Jewish women, and verse 28 says that one of his grandsons married the daughter of Sanballat, another enemy.

The important point here is that the enemy had infiltrated God's people - and a number of the people, including the high priest, seemed to be just fine with this. They didn't want the enemy to take over. No. Probably they had just swallowed the idea of "tolerance" and "peaceful coexistence" with the enemy. But they were badly mistaken!

We too are badly mistaken if we think that we can "coexist peacefully" with the enemies of God. It's natural to think we could get along peacefully together, and even cooperate on some levels - but this really is a backwards step. And that's what we see here in Nehemiah 13. Without strong spiritual leadership, the people go backwards!

2. Sometimes believers have to do more than preach.

Look how Nehemiah took care of the problem: *“I was greatly displeased; so I threw all Tobiah’s household goods out of the room”* (v8). Tobiah had no right to even enter the Temple, never mind actually live there, so Nehemiah personally tossed out all Tobiah’s stuff out! That reminds us of the occasions when *“Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves”* (Matthew 21:12).

When sin exists, sometimes preaching is enough. The people respond. In Nehemiah 8 the people responded to the Word of God: they wept, and when the Word was explained to them they obeyed immediately. And here in verse 3, when they heard the Law, they excluded all who were of foreign descent from Israel.

By the way - in verse 1, *“On that day”* is not connected to chapter 12, when things were going well. It refers to the “day” when Nehemiah returned and started to get things straightened out. *“On that day”* was the day when the people of Judah heard the Word of God, about excluding people of foreign descent. They responded and obeyed.

The prophet Malachi was also preaching during this time. Malachi was preaching in Jerusalem when Nehemiah was putting forth the Word. And some of the people responded and obeyed the Word - but apparently there were many, including even the high priest, who didn’t respond to the teaching of the Word.

So Nehemiah had to take action. He had to do more than “just preaching”! And that’s our doctrinal point. Sometimes preaching is not enough. When people don’t respond, we may have to do more than just preach. Nehemiah took strong action when he took all of Tobiah’s stuff and threw it out of the apartment into the temple courts.

Church leadership may need to do take action at times. When preaching doesn’t correct a problem in the congregation, discipline must be carried out. This is true in the Christian family as well. Parents must do more than teach and preach; they must take action and use godly discipline. And I emphasize **godly** discipline.

Practical Applications

1. God can turn your curse into a blessing.

Verse 2: *“Our God turned the curse into a blessing.”* This is a reference to Numbers 2, when Israel was traveling through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The Moabites had hired a false prophet named Balaam to curse Israel, but God caused Balaam, in spite of himself, to bless Israel! As God turned Balaam’s curse for Israel into a blessing then, so God can do the same today. Psalm 76:10 says, *“God makes the wrath of man to praise Him.”* God can turn a curse into a blessing.

Think of what God has done in spite of the curse of communism. From the human perspective, it looked like Christianity could be blotted out in countries that were controlled by communist dictators. But God has been at work! The church in China has been purified and has experienced incredible growth!

You may be in a situation that looks like the enemy has the upper hand. No! The enemy does not have the upper hand. God is at work, and He can turn your curse into a blessing!

2. You can turn God's blessing into a curse.

That's what Eliashib did. God had blessed him. God had put him in charge of the Temple and its courts. God had provided for the Temple priests and Levites through the grain offerings, and the tithes and first fruits. But what did Eliashib do? Because of his alliance with Tobiah, he removed these provisions from the Temple courts and let Tobiah move in! The enemy was able to establish himself where the provisions of God's blessing should have been! Eliashib turned God's blessing into a curse.

Unfortunately, we can do the same thing. Is there an area in your life where God wants to bless you, but you've let the enemy into that area and it's become a curse? Take the area of reading, for example. There's a lot of good stuff that you can read and be blessed – like the Word of God, and books that explain the Bible, or Christian journals and magazines. But instead you're reading trash. The enemy has taken over in an area where God wants to bless you! You've turned an area of potential blessing into a curse.

What should you do? Do exactly what Nehemiah did. Remember, if you're a Christian, you're a "temple" of the Holy Spirit – so don't let the enemy dump his stuff and take up residence in sanctified places where God wants to bless you – such as in your **mind**. Take immediate action! Throw the trash out! Throw out any reading or viewing material that has become a curse to you. [And be very careful where you click on the internet!]

As they cleansed out the Temple room that Tobiah taken over (v9), so cleanse your mind and let God bless you in any area that has possibly become a curse. In the words of Romans 12:2, let your mind be renewed. *"Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."*