



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Nehemiah 13:1-31

Topic

Decades after he first came and saw the ruined wall, Nehemiah reflects on his service to the LORD

Title

*"I Came... I Saw... I Constructed"*

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What do you want on your Tombstone?

The usual answer was, "Pepperoni and cheese." Possibly a little morbid for mediocre frozen pizza, but the television ad campaign was memorable.

What do *you* want on *your* tombstone; the real one that will mark your grave?

- Mathematician Ludolph van Ceulen was the first person to calculate the value of  $\pi$  (pi) to 35 decimal places. It is inscribed on his tombstone.
- Rodney Dangerfield wanted to be remembered for his comedy even after death so he chose the epitaph, “There goes the neighborhood.”
- You gotta love Mel Blanc’s tombstone. If you don’t recognize his name, you’d recognize his voices: Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Tweety Bird, Sylvester the Cat, Yosemite Sam, Foghorn Leghorn, Marvin the Martian, Pepé Le Pew, Speedy Gonzales, Wile E. Coyote, Road Runner, and the Tasmanian Devil. For the man who voiced so many of our favorite cartoon characters, the epitaph on his tombstone reads, “That’s all, folks.”

Tombstones have gone hi-tech. Some have RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tags embedded in them that can store text and pictures. When you are near with a smartphone equipped with compatible technology, the information is displayed on the screen.

More recent tombstones utilize QR codes and Near Field Communication.

Before you can answer what you want on your tombstone, we should take a look at what Nehemiah said about being remembered:

Neh 13:30 Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service,

Neh 13:31 *and to bringing* the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times. **Remember me, O my God, for good!**

First and foremost, Nehemiah wanted to be remembered by God “for good” he had done. He was concerned with what God valued - *not with what men valued.*

Nehemiah more specifically asked the LORD to remember his “good” in two houses: The houses of the Israelites, and the house of God - the

Temple. If God values those houses... **So must we.**

I'll organize my comments around those two houses: #1 God Will Remember You For Your Conduct In His House, and #2 God Will Remember You For Your Conduct As His House.

## #1 God Will Remember You For Your Conduct In His House

(v4-22)

I haven't told my family yet, but I want to be buried in the the Kreuzberg district of Berlin. That's where Café Strauss is located. It's a café *located within a cemetery*. (Believe it or not, cemetery cafés are increasingly popular in Europe).

A Google search turned up a couple of cafés in the US *near* cemeteries, but I couldn't find one *inside* a cemetery. We could be the first in America.

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Nehemiah 13:1-31

*"I Came... I Saw... I Constructed"*

Maybe the good people at Grangeville Cemetery would let me set-up a coffee cart during funerals. I have a working name for it: *Death Before Decaf*. Insensitive?

Perhaps I've gone too far, but I really am trying to make a point. All of us want to be remembered for something more than a hobby or an activity. I don't want people to remember me for owning 75 coffee makers; or liking civet coffee; or creating the hashtag #PastorsPour. We ought to be remembered for something God values.

Let me set the stage for chapter thirteen. After a dozen years as governor in Jerusalem, Nehemiah returned to Persia. Then, according to verse six, "after certain days," Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem. We don't know for certain how long he was gone; not too long. But long enough for the Israelites to once again neglect their houses and the house of God.

Verse one begins, “on that day...” In verse four you read “now before this...” Nehemiah began a topic, then pivoted to talk about something else:

- Verses four through twenty-two are the pivot, describing how the Israelites were neglecting the house of God.
- Verses one through three connect with verses twenty-four through thirty-one to describe how the Israelites were neglecting their own houses.

Neh 13:4 Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, *was* allied with Tobiah.

Tobiah appeared at the beginning of the book, during Nehemiah’s first stint in Jerusalem. He vigorously opposed Nehemiah’s efforts to rebuild the wall. Tobiah had married into a Jewish family, as did his son - even though this was prohibited by God’s Law. It was sinister.

Neh 13:5 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.

It was incredible that such a person would be held in high esteem. Worse yet: Eliashib gave him a room in the Temple the size of a small warehouse and allowed Tobiah to live there.

Neh 13:6 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,

Neh 13:7 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.

I would have liked to have been there when Nehemiah found out that his nonbelieving Gentile archenemy was living in God's house. It would be like Superman finding out Lex Luther had a winter home in the Fortress of Solitude.

Can this apply to us, in God's house on earth, the church? It comes to mind that we might become Tobiah-like. The apostle Paul warned believers not to "give place to the devil." It's not as though he, or a demon, can possess us; they cannot. But if I willfully yield myself to his temptations, I give him a place, a foothold, from which to further ruin me.

Neh 13:8 And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room.

I'm reading between the lines, but I don't think Nehemiah packed-up anything with foam, or hired movers



Neh 13:9 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.

Somebody like Billy the Exterminator was called upon to spiritually fumigate the space Tobiah had been occupying. Then Nehemiah returned it to its intended purpose.

To finish the becoming Tobiah-like illustration: If you confess your sin, Jesus is faithful and just to forgive it. **You can ‘evict’ sin any time.** Don’t wait; do it now, before you feel at home with it.

Neh 13:10 I also realized that the portions for the Levites had not been given *them*; for each of the Levites and the singers who did the work had gone back to his field.

Temple servants were to be supported by these offerings. They were being withheld, forcing the Levites and the singers away from God’s house to manual labor.

Neh 13:11 So I contended with the rulers, and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their place.

Before the ministry, I was in a few corporate meetings where folks got "set... in their place." It wasn't pretty.

Neh 13:12 Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse.

The prophet Malachi, contemporary of Nehemiah, had a colorful way of describing the Jews withholding of their tithe. He said they were robbing God. Let that sink in.

I probably should say it more: If you give anything at all to Calvary Hanford, God bless you. We are thankful.

“Tithe” means 10%. We don’t think New Testament believers are commanded to give 10% of their before-tax income, although some graciously do. It’s not commanded, but since it was so common, some Christians adopt it.

Whether it is 10%, more or less, you *are* to give regularly, cheerfully, and sacrificially, as you have purposed in your heart. The hard truth is that the majority of believers don’t tithe. Neither do they give the New Testament way. Are they robbing God?

One reason we don’t pressure folks to give: If you give nothing, and aren’t reprovved by the exhortation that you are robbing God, nothing I can say will matter.

Neh 13:13 And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouse Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah; and next to them *was* Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and their task *was* to distribute to their brethren.

Neh 13:14 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 its services!

Nehemiah set in order the daily ministry of the  
House of God. They were “good deeds” he  
wanted remembered.

With Temple life out of order, so was their daily  
worship life. It affected, for example, their  
observance of the weekly Sabbath.

Neh 13:15 In those days I saw *people* in Judah  
treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and  
bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with  
wine, grapes, figs, and all *kinds of* burdens,  
which they brought into Jerusalem on the  
Sabbath day. And I warned *them* about the day  
on which they were selling provisions.

Neh 13:16 Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who  
brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold  
*them* on the Sabbath to the children of Judah,  
and in Jerusalem.

Neh 13:17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing *is* this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day?

Neh 13:18 Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

“Added wrath” was a reminder that God calculated the length of the Babylonian captivity - 70 years - by adding-up all the Sabbath years that Israel had failed to observe.

Neh 13:19 So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted *some* of my servants at the gates, *so that* no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day.

Nehemiah forced them to obey the Sabbath regulations. Israel was a theocracy.

They weren't free to keep the Sabbath or not. We are, BTW. Free from the Sabbath entirely in terms of observing it physically.

The issue for us: What are we doing with our freedom? Are we involved in God's house on earth? Is the church a priority?

Neh 13:20 Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice.

Neh 13:21 Then I warned them, and said to them, "Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do *so* again, I will lay hands on you!" From that time on they came no *more* on the Sabbath.

"I will lay hands on you" is like Bruce Banner saying, "You wouldn't like me when I'm angry."

Neh 13:22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the

Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God,  
*concerning* this also, and spare me according to  
the greatness of Your mercy!

Nehemiah jump-started the Levites, getting them  
out of the fields and back to the house of God.

Simple exhortation here: Those believers you  
know who don't attend a local church - Try to  
jump-start them by inviting them. Put loving  
pressure on them.

**TWO** of the three times Nehemiah says,  
“remember me,” are in the verses we just  
covered. It's worth noting that in none of those  
instances does he say “remember me as the  
guy who rebuilt the wall in only 52 days.”

Let me put it another way. If you were asked,  
“What did Nehemiah accomplish?” you'd most  
likely say, “he rebuilt Jerusalem's wall.”

The wall was certainly important, on the one hand. But on the other hand, it was nothing. Could God protect Jerusalem without a wall?

Nehemiah was letting us know what God values. In this first case, it was His house on the earth. Not the stick and stone structure itself; its ministry of redemption and salvation.

I can't leave this point without quoting First Timothy 3:15, "*I write* so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

Based on your conduct in the church, what is a fitting epitaph for your tombstone?

#2 God Will Remember You  
For Your Conduct As His House  
(v1-3 & 23-31)



Returning to verses one, we learn that Israel had not remained separated from the Gentiles surrounding them. They had, in fact, intermarried - a thing forbidden (for good reason) in the Law.

Neh 13:1 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,

Neh 13:2 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.

Neh 13:3 So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.

Verse two is a great summary of a longer story in which Balaam was hired to curse Israel, but couldn't. Wanting to get paid, he told Israel's enemies to send Moabite women into the camp, to entice the Israelite men. Then God Himself would discipline His people - which He did.

This story from the Word - they knew it, but they didn't heed it. It was a classic case of hearers, not doers. Anointed by God, Nehemiah brought the story back to their remembrance, and they immediately practiced its implications.

One reason a believer should attend church services: **You'll hear things you already know, but are not obeying, as the Holy Spirit anoints the Word in your hearing.**

Neh 13:23 In those days I also saw Jews *who* had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, *and* Moab.

Neh 13:24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people.

There were practical reasons for prohibiting intermarriage. The children born down the line would no longer speak or understand Hebrew - the language of their Bible.

God's Word would be lost to future generations.  
***We wouldn't have it today.***

Neh 13:25 So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, *saying*, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves.

Before saying anything else, let me point out that Jewish marriages in which a Gentile partner converted to Judaism were *not* considered intermarriages. God was all about saving Gentiles.

He probably pulled out their beards. It was a sign of discipline - to go around with part of your beard violently removed. We have no such practices!

Neh 13:26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his

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God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin.

Neh 13:27 Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?"

Nehemiah grounded everything in the Word. He used examples skillfully. So should we.

Neh 13:28 And *one* of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, *was* a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I drove him from me.

It was an evil strategy of Satan; a web of intrigue and interference. Decisive action was needed. No procedure, no due process; just get out!

Neh 13:29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

A couple of things you definitely DO NOT want to be remembered for - defiling yourself and/or others with you. I've heard too many empty eulogies.

The final three verses summarize:

Neh 13:30 Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan...

That is, he set in order their individual houses.

Neh 13:30 ... I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service, I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service,

Neh 13:31 and to bringing the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times...

He set in order the house of God.

“Remember me, O my God, for good!”

We do; and we can be assured that God does, as Nehemiah awaits his physical resurrection from the grave.

**What** do you want on your Tombstone? If you want God to remember you for good, here is what Micah said God is looking for: “He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8).

The Book of Ecclesiastes ends with what would be a great epitaph. I’ll adapt it for a tombstone: “He/She feared God and kept His commandments.”

