

# The Making of a Pearl

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part XVI

Nehemiah 13

## Introduction

I was sent a card as a belated happy birthday from a member of our church. It was on the subject of aging, of course.

Do you realize that the only time in our lives when we like to get old is when we are kids? If you are less than ten years old, you are so excited about aging that you think in fractions.

“How old are you?”

“I’m five and a half . . . I’ll be six in three weeks.”

Do you realize that you are never thirty six and a half?! No, you are five and a half and you are going to be six in three weeks.

Then you get into your teens, and now no one can hold you back. You literally jump to the next number.

“How old are you?”

“I’m gonna be sixteen.”

You could be fourteen, but you will say, “I’m gonna be sixteen . . . eventually.”

Then the great day of your life – you become twenty one. Even the words sound like a ceremony – you become twenty one!

But then, you turn thirty. What happened there? You turn thirty. It makes you sound like bad milk. “He turned thirty, so we had to throw him out.”

What changed? You become twenty one, but you turn thirty.

Then, you are pushing forty. You reach fifty.

You become twenty one; you turn thirty; you are pushing forty; you reach fifty – then, you make it to sixty.

By then, you have built up so much speed, you hit seventy.

Then, you are just simply in your eighty’s. My grandmother will not even buy green bananas, because they are too much of an investment in the future.

And, it does not end there. Once you are in the ninety’s, you start going backwards. I was just ninety two.

Then a strange thing happens – if you make it over one hundred, you become a little kid again.

“How old are you?”

“I’m one hundred and a half . . . in fact, in three weeks, I’ll be one hundred one.”

Isn’t life fast?

I answered the phone, recently, and it was a call for my wife from a girl she roomed with in college. She had called to talk to Marsha. She was not in, so her friend gave me the message that her son was engaged to be married.

I said, “Your son . . . how old is he?”

She laughed and said, “He’s twenty years old.”

I said, “You’re kidding . . . wait a second, we’re too young to be that old.”

She laughed too.

How life changes. Sometimes the changes, and the pressures, and the tribulations become so great that you, at thirty eight, or forty eight, or fifty eight,

would like to be five and a half all over again – when life was simple.

I was sent a letter, recently, from another church friend. Let me read it to you.

At the top are big letters that read,

*Resignation!*

*I am hereby officially tendering my resignation as an adult. I have decided I would like to accept the responsibilities of a six year old again.*

*I want to go to a McDonald's and think that it's a four star restaurant. I want to see who can blow the biggest bubble. I want to think M&M's are better than money because you can eat them. I want to drink Kool-Aid and eat lemon heads with my friends. I don't want to change clothes because they got a little dirty, and I want to enjoy every day like it's summer vacation.*

*I want to return to a time when life was simple. All you knew was to be happy, because you were unaware of all the things that should make you worried or upset. I want to be excited about little things again, like my new hot wheel or jump rope. I want to live simple again.*

*I don't want my day to consist of computer crashes, paperwork, cleaning, children, chores, depressing news, illness, and loss. I want to be in the roller derby and believe the Three Stooges are real.*

*So, here's my checkbook and my car keys, my credit card bills and my 401K statements, my pager, my cell phone, my palm pilot (okay, I'll keep that), my fax machine, and, not least of all, my mortgage book. I am officially resigning from adulthood.*

*And if you want to discuss this further, you'll have to catch me first because, "Tag, you're it and you've got cooties. So, see you later, alligator . . . after awhile, crocodile."*

I want to live simple again too – with no deep problems and no painful challenges. I want to live where the water is calm and the breeze is pleasant.

You know, as well as I do, that life is not like that at all. Life is not simple! Even our Lord referred to each day being full of trouble.

Dr. Richard Seume, a man I had the privilege of worshipping under as he led the student body of Dallas Seminary in chapel worship, put an interesting

perspective on the subject of not just growing older, but on the ongoing troubles and pressures of life. This is quoted from a commentary on James by Kent Hughes.

*Making Pearls*

*Life on earth would not be worth much if every source of tribulation were removed. Yet most of us rebel against the things that irritate us, and count as heavy loss what ought to be rich gain. We are told that the oyster is wiser; then when an irritating object, like a bit of sand, gets under the mantle of his shell, he begins covering it with the most precious part of his being – and he fashions a pearl. The irritation that it was causing is stopped by encrusting it with the pearly formation. Imagine that – a pearl is simply a victory over tribulation.*

We come to the final chapter in the memoirs of Nehemiah. A time when the clock jumps forward more than a decade, and Nehemiah is seventy years old.

I think it is incredibly significant that God would close this dynamic book with Nehemiah handling pressure and tribulation. But that is reality! That happens to be the true picture of Christianity. It is not “happily ever after” throughout the Christian life . . . at least, not yet. But, for here and now, it is never comfortable carrying a cross.

And, godly living is not simply gaining victory over a series of problems and then moving on to new ones. Sometimes it is battling the same ones again and again and again.

Nehemiah has only recently experienced great victory. He has cleaned up the city, rebuilt the walls, expelled the enemies, unified the nation, and brought the people through an extended revival. If there was a time when seventy year old Nehemiah would resign from battle, it would be now.

In fact, if there was ever a time when he would not be up for any more struggles, it would be now. If there was ever a time when he would become disillusioned with the ongoing pressures and tribulations of life, it would be now. You would almost expect Nehemiah to say, “I’m resigning. I want life back like it was when I was a little kid. I want to return to the simple life.”

But in the aging years of his life, just when you would expect him to walk away from trouble and reach for the rocking chair, he instead fashions

another pearl. And he reveals his greatest faith yet – and his most intimate moments with God.

## Lessons About The Christian Life

Before we begin one last look into this man's personal diary, I want to make two observations that come directly out of Nehemiah's own experience. These are two realistic lessons about the Christian life:

1. Your greatest test of faith is always the next one.
2. Your greatest display of character has yet to happen.

So do not rest on your laurels. Past victories do not guarantee future ones. Your greatest test, as a believer, is just around the corner.

The question is, will you retreat from the hard work of the Christian life, or will you shape even more pearls for the glory of God?

## The Persistence of Sin

Let us take one more look at a man who did not run from the tribulations of life.

### The sin of . . . (13:1-9)

The first situation that arose for Nehemiah to face involved the sin of compromise. Look at chapter 13, verses 1 through 7.

*On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. So it came about, when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel. Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah, had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of*

*Babylon I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king, and I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God.*

If you put the chronological pieces together, you discover that, after Nehemiah had served as governor for several years in Jerusalem, he had returned to King Artaxerxes. He stays for several years, serving again in the palace of the king.

We are not sure, but perhaps he heard that his old enemy was gaining ground once again inside the city walls. His old enemy Tobiah, verse 5 told us, had been given a suite of rooms, plural, inside the temple itself. An Ammonite was living in the Jewish temple, which was a direct violation of God's Law.

Verse 4 tells us that Tobiah was given this suite of rooms by Eliashib, the High Priest. He was a High Priest who was related to Sanballat. You may remember, Sanballat and Tobiah were friends and co-enemies of Nehemiah. So, the high priest was compromising with the enemy and had actually invited him into the temple to stay.

One author said that,

*. . . inviting Tobiah to live in the Jewish temple was like inviting a possum to live in the chicken coup.*

Sometimes that is how the enemy of God's people works. Another author commented,

*Even to this day, Satan does not always fight churches, sometimes he joins them.*

Nehemiah reminds me of our Lord, who came into the temple precinct brandishing a whip. He beat all of the Gentile merchants off the temple property, turning over their tables and chasing them out.

Notice verses 8 and 9.

*And it was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room [suite]. Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense.*

Can you see Nehemiah? As soon as he sees what is happening, he throws out all of Tobiah's clothes, his furniture, his razor, and his bathrobe. He hauls it all out and then, has the rooms ceremonially fumigated. One author commented that,

*Nehemiah didn't even want the smell of Tobiah hanging around.*

Dear friends, Nehemiah handled this compromise in the same way he handled it in chapter 4 and in chapter 6. He handled compromise *immediately!*

There was no lollygaging around; no dialogue; no maneuvering to make sure Tobiah had someplace else to live. No! There was sin in the camp and a sinner in the temple, and Nehemiah dealt with both immediately.

May I remind you that today, in this dispensation of grace, according to I Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 16,

*... you are the temple of God...*

and, according to I Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 19,

*... your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit..*

.

May I ask you a question? How do you deal with sin in your temple?

Have you set up a suite of rooms and invited something to come and live inside of you that does not belong in the holy temple of God? Have you secretly decorated some room in your heart and invited lust or pride or dishonesty to move in?

Deal with sin like Nehemiah dealt with compromise. He dealt with it decisively, and he dealt with it immediately.

Keep the temple of God clean!

### **The sin of . . . (13:10-14)**

Another sinful situation arises for Nehemiah, it is the persistent sin of selfishness. Look at verse 10.

*I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field.*

Stop for just a moment. Can you imagine how Nehemiah must have felt? I believe there is a volume behind the words, "I also discovered . . ."

Can you imagine how discouraging this must have been? In our study of Nehemiah, chapter 10, we watched as the Jewish nation signed a declaration specifically stating that they would not withhold their financial resources from the temple. And now, some years later, Nehemiah discovers they have not kept their word.

"I also discovered. . ." Frankly, that hit him hard, as you will see in a moment.

This is like:

- the teacher who discovers the dishonesty of his favorite student,
- the wife whose husband has promised he will never drink again and then, she discovers a bottle hidden in his closet,
- the parents who have heard their son or daughter promise they are clean, only to discover drugs stashed away in a drawer,
- the spouse who discovers the unfaithfulness of their mate.

"Wham," your heart rips apart. You want to quit. Your soul aches and you hardly know how to breathe. You want to retreat to a simpler life.

Nehemiah discovered the infidelity of God's people; their dishonesty; their selfishness. Instead of running, he buckles down for the long haul, and in verses 11 and 12,

*So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts. All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.*

In other words, he reprimands the leaders, They had allowed it to go on; they had turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to the unfaithfulness of the people. But he does not just reprimand the leaders, he re-instructs the people and restores them to their proper place.

But notice Nehemiah's personal conversation with the Lord in verse 14.

*Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.*

It is like he said, "Oh Lord . . . these people – how agonizing to have to go back down this path again. Lord, please don't forget what I'm trying to do here for your sake and for the sake of your glory."

### **The sin of . . . (13:15-22)**

But that was not all Nehemiah discovered upon his return to Jerusalem. He soon noticed the sin of materialism had crept back inside the city gates. Look at verses 15 through 19.

*In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs, and*

*all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food. Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? Did not your fathers do the same so that our God brought on us, and on this city, all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath." And it came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates that no load should enter on the sabbath day.*

By the way, you might notice that Nehemiah, in verse 22, prayed after he obeyed. He prayed after he acted, not before.

There are certain things you do not need to pray about before you do them. God has already spoken.

For example, I Thessalonians, chapter 4, verse 3,  
***For this is the will of God . . . that you abstain from sexual immorality***

That is the biblical word for sexual relations outside of marriage. You do not need to pray about that one. You do not need to ask God if there are any loopholes or extenuating circumstances, like engagement, or love, or everybody else does it. God said, "Don't."

Romans, chapter 13, verse 7, says,

***Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due . . .***

Some of you are thinking, "I'd rather you keep preaching against fornication."

You do not have to get on your knees sometime before April fifteenth and pray, "Lord, is it your will that I pay my taxes?"

He has already said it is. There are no loopholes around the will of God.

I love the way Nehemiah removes even the temptation from the people of Jerusalem. Notice verses 20 through 21a.

***Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night***

***outside Jerusalem. Then I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you." . . .***

That is the nice, biblical way of saying, "Next time I see you here on the Sabbath, I'm going to give you a black eye."

Can you just see seventy year old Nehemiah, "Hey you, I see you hanging around these gates on Friday night again, and I'm gonna punch your lights out, so help me Jehovah Elohim."

I love the next phrase, in verse 21.

***. . . From that time on they did not come on the sabbath.***

"We don't want to mess with that ole' guy. Wow!"

Continue to verse 22,

***And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. . . .***

What insight. Let us deal with this threat realistically. Nehemiah added to the job description of every Levite. He said, "Listen, do what you do during the week, but on the Sabbath, I want you to become gatekeepers! Keep these merchants from hanging around the walls. Let's protect the people from temptation as best we can."

By the way, that happens to be the job description of spiritual leaders, including every parent here. You happen to be a gatekeeper. Keep even the temptation away from the family, the children, the flock as best as you can. You are a gatekeeper, so stay alert. Materialism and the self-centered philosophy of our world system are powerfully attractive.

I recently read that we are confronted with at least two thousand commercials every day. Two thousand! Billboards, radio, television, magazines, newspapers, the Internet, you name it. Your children will fight their biggest battles in learning what to listen to and what to ignore.

Some years ago, our twin sons turned six. That was a long time ago now. I was reading old notes and read about their birthday. They received money from family and friends. They were sitting on the couch, counting all their loot, when one of them announced, "I'm gonna give all my birthday money to church!"

He is my favorite child! We looked at the other son, this little six year old, and, without batting an

eye, he said, “Not me, I’m going to spend all mine at the mall.”

He takes after his . . . well, just never mind who!  
“I’m going to buy candy,” he said.

I remember looking back at the other boy, who was fidgeting around. You could almost see the battle going on inside him, “I forgot all about that candy counter at the mall.”

I do not know what happened next, but what a great illustration for sixteen year olds, and thirty six year olds, and sixty year olds who want to make a spiritual commitment, but then other voices are heard that make it tough to follow through!

How do you handle materialism? What kind of gatekeeper are you in your own life?

### **The sin of . . . (13:23-31)**

Finally, Nehemiah deals with the sin of disobedience. Look at verses 23 and 24.

*In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people.*

You may remember the problem the nation had in chapter 8, as Ezra stood and read the Law. None of the people could understand Hebrew. For hours on end, Ezra and the priests explained the meanings of the words. Hebrew was re-taught to the people.

But here, the children are learning the language of their foreign, Gentile mothers. None of them could speak Hebrew! None of the children were being taught to read their national language.

And, if they could not read Hebrew, they would not be able to read the Law. And, if they could not read the Law, they would not be able to obey the Law. And, if they could not obey the Law, they would be out of the will of God.

In a matter of only a few years, the people of God had moved from revival to rebellion.

Notice who is in the middle of it all, in verse 28.

*Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me.*

Do you notice how these names just keep cropping up?

*. . . Eliashib the high priest . . . Sanballat . . . so I drove him away from me.*

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, informs us that this grandson of Eliashib was named Manasseh. When Nehemiah kicked him out of Jerusalem, he immediately went to live with his father-in-law, Sanballat, in Samaria, and there established a false system of worship on Mount Gerezim.

It was the false system of worship for those people of Samaria known as Samaritans.

Nehemiah spotted the problem and the problem maker – and dealt with it severely.

Donald Campbell, in his book, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge*, writes,

*In these days when all areas of life are filled with confusion and are falling into disorder, we do well to subject our souls to the steadying, refreshing influence of a man like Nehemiah who was specific in his purposes toward God and who turned wishbones into backbones . . . we may believe that his influence ran down private channels in families and humble houses to the very time of the Messiah.*

## **Application**

Let us make a couple of applications to our own lives.

### **God does not provide final victory over sin . . .**

1. God does not provide final victory over sin but repeated victory over sin.

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was quoted by Warren Wiersbe, in his book, *Be Determined*, as once saying to his staff,

*I want you to always bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes continually removed for the fire to keep burning.*

### **Temptation in the believer’s life does not diminish with age . . .**

2. Temptation in the believer’s life does not diminish with age, it grows more clever.

It is best to follow Nehemiah’s example to:

- Tackle compromise – immediately.
- Handle selfishness – humbly.

- Attack materialism – realistically.
- Deal with disobedience – severely.

One of the authors in my library, that I have enjoyed reading and quoting, was the pastor, for many years, in one church in downtown Philadelphia. I have especially enjoyed his commentary on the book of Nehemiah, entitled, *Nehemiah: Learning to Lead*. His name is James Montgomery Boice. He recently died of liver cancer, after having been diagnosed just ten weeks earlier. He wrote, in the final pages of his commentary on Nehemiah, these words,

*The Christian life is hard work. Even the Bible recognizes it as hard work by describing it as a battle (I Timothy 6:12, “Fight the good fight of faith . . .”) and a race (II Timothy 4:7, “. . . I have finished the [race] . . .”) and a sacrifice (Romans 12:1, “I urge you . . . brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”).*

Boice goes on to write,

*Bible study is hard. Prayer is hard. Witnessing is hard. Living a holy life in the midst of temptation is extremely difficult. Jesus Christ promised his followers, not a comfortable life, but a cross.*

In other words, you cannot resign from trouble. You cannot go back to being a kid. There is no return to a simpler life. So, you had better learn how to make pearls out of tribulations and keep on moving forward for Christ.

Nehemiah closes his memoirs with his final words in verse 31,

**. . . Remember me, O my God, for good.**

That is another way of saying, “Lord, I want to live life so that, when you think of me, You will have good thoughts; when You observe my ways and my choices and my lifestyle, You will be pleased with me.”

This was his greatest passion in life. That, my friends, is the story of Nehemiah’s heart and his faith and his passion for God.

But it has been more than just the story of a man’s life. It happens to be a demonstration of the only way to live!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/25/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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