

A Realistic Revival

Jason Abbott

The Bible is an unflinchingly honest book. It retells some really messy history and presents us with a bunch of flawed protagonists. And, the history of Nehemiah is no exception. None of us would've written the ending we're about to read together. It's not a romantic or happy ending. But, it is a real one—which ultimately points us to something far better than mere reform and revival.

Let's see today what that something is as we conclude our study of Nehemiah. I'm going to read the whole chapter.

Nehemiah 13

13 On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God,² because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.)³ When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.

⁴ Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah,⁵ and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil prescribed for the Levites, musicians and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.

⁶ But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission⁷ and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God.⁸ I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room.⁹ I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.

¹⁰ I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.¹¹ So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the

house of God neglected?” Then I called them together and stationed [each of] them at their posts.

¹² All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil into the storerooms. ¹³ I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zakkur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because they were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites.

¹⁴ Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.

¹⁵ In those days I saw people in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. ¹⁶ People from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. ¹⁷ I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Didn’t your ancestors do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.”

¹⁹ When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. ²¹ But I warned them and said, “Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will arrest you.” From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. ²² Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.

²³ Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. ²⁴ Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. ²⁵ I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some

of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said [to them]:

“You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. ²⁶ Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. ²⁷ Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?”

²⁸ One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me.

²⁹ Remember them, my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.

³⁰ So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. ³¹ I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the firstfruits.

Remember me with favor, my God.

In this text, we see that the people have begun playing at reform and revival. And, we can see their sins in two ways. The people are (1st) **playing at faithfulness**. On the one hand, they have become pharisees when it comes to the laws of the Lord while, on the other, they've begun to completely disregard God's commandments. And, the people are (2nd) **playing at favorites**. They have begun to use the worship of God and its institutions as a way to favor friends and family.

1. **Playing at faithfulness (vv. 1-3; 15-28)**

I imagine, when you read this text, that you're confused and unsettled by it. At first glance, it appears to be institutionalized racism at a couple of different levels. Let's be honest, isn't that what it seems like? Foreign people are forever excluded from the worship of Yahweh (v. 3). And, the people of God shouldn't marry those who are not from Israel (v. 25). I mean, what do we do with this passage?!

(This, by the way, is a prime example as to why I favor expositional preaching. If I didn't preach whole books of the Bible, I'd likely be tempted to sidestep texts like this one. I'd likely be tempted to ignore the ugly elephant in the biblical room.)

Things, however, aren't always what they first appear to be. And, that's true in this case. This isn't really about race but, rather, about religious devotion.

You see today we don't see someone's ethnicity as having all that much to do with his or her theology. But, historically speaking, that's a rather new phenomenon. And, it was certainly not true of those in the ancient Near East. If you were a Moabite then you worshipped the Moabite gods. If you were an Ammonite, Ammonite gods. If you were a Roman, Roman gods. And, so on and so forth!

So, largely what's being addressed in this passage is the purity of the worship of Yahweh. The Lord is demanding that his people not worship a pluralistic pantheon of gods. He demands their pure devotion because he is the one, true God of all things. He's the Creator of all peoples. They were all created in his image—every tongue, every tribe, every nation. There is no other God.

So rest assured, this text isn't about race—though in this passage the Israelites are making it about race. And, this is the first way we see the revival going off track. They are twisting and misusing the word of God.

The biblical text being read to the Israelites in verse one is from Deuteronomy. It deals with the mistreatment of Israel by Moab and Ammon as they are traveling to the Promised Land. Essentially Israel asks for permission to cross thru both Moab and Ammon in peace. They even offer to pay for any resources which they may use along the way. However, these two nations refuse and then even attack the Israelites. As a penalty for this, the Lord God prohibits both the Moabites and the Ammonites from entering his covenant community for a set period of time.

Yet, notice what the people do with this prohibition. They elevate and twist it. No longer is it for a set period of time. Now this prohibition is indefinitely extended by the Israelites—now they'll never “be admitted into the assembly of God” (v. 1). Moreover, the Israelites don't simply extend the prohibition to Moab and Ammon. Here they begin excluding “all who were of foreign descent” (v. 3).

Do you see? The people are off track! They are not being faithful to the laws of God. They are using his laws as a weapon. They are callously overapplying them

like the Pharisees did in Jesus's day. They've forgotten the mercy God showed them. Instead, they are eager to—"load people down with burdens they can hardly carry" and are unwilling to "lift one finger to help them" (Luke 11:46).

Revival is off track! The people are playing a faithfulness! And it is ugly!

But that's not all. At the end of the text, we find that another group of Israelites is ironically doing the opposite thing with God's laws. They're underapplying them or ignoring them altogether. This is the second way we see revival getting off track among the people of Jerusalem.

In this case, the issue is intermarriages between Israelites and foreign peoples from the surrounding regions. This was prohibited by God. (Now, again, remember this prohibition wasn't about race.) It was about not compromising religious identity. It was a prohibition against syncretistic or pluralistic worship. That *this* was the point is clearly demonstrated in the example Nehemiah gives. He brings up the marriages of Solomon to various foreign wives. Solomon's marriages were notorious in Israel. These wives led him to sin against God and build temples in Jerusalem to the gods whom his wives worshipped (1 Kings 11:4). So, the Israelites are ignoring the laws of the Lord.

And, the Israelites are doing the same with the Sabbath as well (vv. 15-22). They are buying and selling on the day of rest. They are neglecting the laws of God when it benefits or suits them. They are no longer listening to the Lord.

Revival is off track! Again, Israel is merely playing at being faithful!

Friends, we must pay attention at this point. Just as Israel is playing around, when it comes to the service and worship of the Lord, we can likewise play around at serving and worshipping him. We can use his laws as a bludgeon, and we can ignore whatever seems inconvenient in his word. We can (*and often do*) play at faithfulness. We pretend at it. And, it is truly repulsive whenever we do.

- Celebrating and exalting the Bible as the very word of God is an ugly thing when in the quiet and private moments of our day we rarely if ever read it. And, it's equally ugly when we use it to relentlessly remind someone else of how they've fallen short and failed.

- Talking about the power of prayer is an ugly thing if when we tell someone that we'll pray for them we promptly walk away with no intention to do it. And, it's equally (if not more so) whenever we use it to extol our holiness by magnifying someone else's sin (cf. Luke 18:9-14).

Church family, our own witness and the reform and revival of God are at risk whenever we play around at faithfulness—whenever we pretend at holiness and zeal. Nothing derails revival in the church like using the word of God as a deadly weapon on the very people to which it's meant to heal and give life. And, in equal measure, nothing makes church less meaningful than marginalizing the voice of the Lord God. For goodness sake, what are we doing here if we don't believe that the word of God, that the Bible, has authority in our lives?

Brothers and sisters, don't play church life! Friends, don't play at the service and worship of God! Don't play at faithfulness!

And, this brings us to a second kind of playing.

2. Playing at favorites (vv. 4-22)

This is also derailing revival in Jerusalem. I'm going to keep this point short. Look at verse four with me.

...Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil prescribed for the Levites, musicians and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests (vv. 4-5).

So, what do we have here? Well, the very same Tobiah who had mocked Israel during the rebuilding of the wall is now being given favors and lodging by Eliashib who's an Israelite priest. Why? Because he is "closely associated" with him. In fact, Tobiah and Eliashib are probably related thru marriage. That's the suggestion here. Eliashib is playing at favorites—even with someone who conspired to attack Israel in order to prevent them from rebuilding the wall.

Such preferential treatment should never be the practice of the people of God. Not with those inside the church or those outside the church! Not with our friends

and not with our family! Not with those who are popular or with those who are rich! Simply put, Jesus forbids it. That's precisely what the apostle James tells us.

...brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism (James 2:1).

One of the things I love about the Bible is that it doesn't whitewash heroes. And, this is true even of the first men and women whom the Lord God called to serve and worship him. The patriarch Jacob is a prime example of this. He was the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, yet he was often selfish and dishonest. He also played at favorites with his children. The story of Joseph (his favorite) is a perfect example of this sin. It's sad and ugly and creates all kinds of division among young Joseph and his brothers. This shouldn't be so with the people of God!

Jesus loved rich, selfish people who came to him and loved scandalous women who were caught in adultery. He loved powerful centurions and also helpless lepers. He loved pharisees and he loved tax collectors. Friends, when people came to Jesus, they came on equal ground. They received equal attention and equal care from him. And, the same must be true of us.

Whom do you tend to associate with? What kind of people do you invite over? Is it mainly people like you? When someone comes to church who—in your mind—looks awkward or shabby or scary, do you steer clear of him or her? This is playing at favorites. And, it makes our church indistinguishable from the world around us. Such behavior will squelch revival among us because it is the antithesis of the love of our God; it's the antithesis of the love of Jesus.

This is a sad ending to the book of Nehemiah; isn't it? What started so well has petered-out. What had such promise is now failing. And, this is the way revivals in a sinful and fallen world go. They will not last forever as flawed people lose sight of God—as we are distracted by our sinful desires.

No. Revival won't last. We need something more than a mere revival. In fact, revivals like this one point to that need. They point to our need for something bigger: something that will never peter-out, something that won't fail, something eternal! They point to our need for resurrection. They point to our need for a brand-new heart.

They point to our need for a brand-new spirit. They point to our need for a rebirth—not merely a revival.

They point to our need for Jesus. Only he is our rebirth and our resurrection. Only he is our righteousness and our life.

Trust in Christ and Christ alone! Amen.