



Time to Reflect

- How effective are we at observing the Sabbath Day? In what ways could we improve?
- Have we ever struggled with old habits? Spend a few moments praying and ask God for His help and strength as we seek to grow closer to Him.

In our last study our attention was drawn to broken promises and we saw how the initial faithfulness of the Israelites faded away. Beyond this, we also discovered how Nehemiah dealt with this unfaithfulness. In our discussion questions we looked at why we might drift away from God and we reflected on how this can be avoided. This week we conclude our study series on the book of Nehemiah as our focus is drawn to Sabbath observance.

“All of us need unpressured rest...This is why Jesus said that the Sabbath is for man. Rest is not just a meaningless command – it is for our good. It is a vital discipline that keeps us centred on God in all of life. It is serious that the people have broken this promise, and that’s why Nehemiah acts so decisively.”

(Eric Mason, *Nehemiah For You*, p156)

Specifics

- In recent weeks we have been looking at how the Israelites broke the covenant they made with God. This week we discover that they didn’t keep their Sabbath promise.
- In Nehemiah 10:31 we saw how they promised not to engage in business with the Gentiles on the Sabbath Day. Yet Nehemiah encountered “...people in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys...” (v15).
- The people were engaged in their daily work and they were also carrying unnecessary burdens. At the very heart of this activity was the lure of prosperity.
- Warren Wiersbe contends, “The Jewish merchants didn’t want to lose the opportunity to make money from the Gentiles, and the Gentiles were quick to make a profit from their Jewish neighbours.”¹
- The Israelites were quick to abandon their observance of Sabbath in order to focus on finance. In doing this they totally reversed their priorities and they were actually robbing God. They had replaced the pursuit of holiness with a quest for monetary profit.
- Again, Wiersbe proves helpful as he offers an excellent point of application. He observes, “The child of God must choose spiritual wealth rather than material wealth and claim the promise of Matthew 6:33, ‘But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.’”²
- There is a clear warning in this passage about the dangers of neglecting our relationship with God and focusing only on earthly treasures. We are encouraged to develop an eternal perspective rather than be consumed with the here and now.

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined: Nehemiah* (David. C. Cook, 1992), p162.

² Ibid, p162.

- Eric Mason develops this spiritual insight as he suggests that the Israelites, “...lost the spirit of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is about rest; but central to the idea of rest is trusting in God. The people have stopped believing that God will provide.³”
- It is hardly surprising that Nehemiah was troubled by what he encountered and he moved to take immediate action.

1. THE ISRAELITES

- He rebuked the Israelites who were working on the Sabbath and made them stop (v15).

2. THE NOBLES

- He rebuked the nobles for allowing business to be undertaken on the Sabbath (v17).
- Interestingly Nehemiah also reminded them of how this practice had taken place before and it was a cause of their captivity (v18).
- This was a clever move as it was a clear reminder of the dangers of falling back into old habits. This is an important warning for all of us as we seek to grow deeper in our own faith and closer to God. It is easy to regress into old patterns and we should seek God’s help in avoiding this pitfall.

3. THE GATES

- The third step that Nehemiah took was a very practical one. He ordered the city gates to be shut on the Sabbath Day (v19).
- The total closure is likely to have been from just before the Sabbath until after the holy day is over. As such this would have been from about 5pm on Friday until 11am on Sunday morning.
- It appears as though the guards had been willing to open the gates to Gentile merchants so Nehemiah moved to put his own people on duty. It is important to have people who are faithful and trustworthy to partner with us in the tasks that God has called us to undertake.
- Nehemiah also ordered the Levites to purify themselves, set a good example and minister to the Israelites (v22).
- Once again, we are reflecting on how Nehemiah was calling the Israelites to focus on God, honour the covenant that they had made, and pursue holiness. In this particular instance the issue in question was Sabbath observance.
- This is still a very important issue for us today. By way of application, Wiersbe reflects, “...Sunday is a special day to God’s people because it commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as well as the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We ought to use the Lord’s Day to the glory of the Lord.⁴”
- Unfortunately, too many people have followed the example of the Israelites from this week’s passage and have compromised their observance of the Sabbath. Even Christians “...have killed their joy, witness, and spiritual power by turning Sunday into an ordinary day and not putting Christ first in their week.⁵”
- As our passage closes, we see Nehemiah pray once more (v22). May each of us be challenged and encouraged by his example of faithfulness and commitment to God.

³ Eric Mason, *Nehemiah For You* (The Good Book Company, 2022), p157.

⁴ Wiersbe, *Be Determined: Nehemiah*, p164.

⁵ Ibid, p164.