



## BRIGHT SPOT

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Does anybody here know what *triskaidekaphobia* is? It's the fear of the number 13. Hotels typically don't have a 13<sup>th</sup> floor because many guests have a bit of triskaidekaphobia – they're afraid of sleeping in a room that starts with the number 13. They're afraid it will bring them bad luck. Author Stephen King has it so bad he won't even stop reading a book on a page where the page numbers add up to 13.

Back in 1881, a group of prominent New Yorkers decided they would put an end to this fear and superstition once and for all. In that era, everybody believed it was really bad luck to be the 13<sup>th</sup> person seated at a table and that you would die within a year if it was you. This group thought that was nonsense, so they formed something called the Thirteen Club. It was a dinner cabaret, and 13 people attended. They met at 8:13 p.m. on a Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> in room #13 of the Knickerbocker Cottage. Guests had to walk under a ladder to get in and were seated among piles of spilt salt. Everyone survived just fine. And for the next 40 years, other Thirteen Clubs became very popular nationwide. Believe it or not, 5 U.S. presidents joined these clubs, including Teddy Roosevelt.

I have to confess I felt a bit of triskaidekaphobia this week. We're now in chapter 13 of Nehemiah, and I wasn't all that sure I wanted to dig into it. It intimidated me. But not because of the number 13 – I just wasn't sure I wanted to go where that chapter went.

Chapter 13 is the final chapter of Nehemiah. I said back in September that we would walk with Nehemiah as the story unfolded, watching the wall get built, watching the people change. But I was kind of wishing that the story had quit unfolding after last week. Chapter 12 ended on a high note. It was a big party where the whole community came together to dedicate the wall and themselves to God.

It would have been a beautiful place to stop. But apparently Nehemiah just didn't know when to quit. You'll see what I mean in the way chapter 13 starts off:

### **Nehemiah 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, 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.) When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.*

*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, 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 oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.*

*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 permission 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. I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. 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.*

Nehemiah had been in Jerusalem for 12 years. Then he leaves and goes back to Babylon. We aren't really told exactly how long he was gone, but it's long enough for things to change in Jerusalem. And not for the better. He comes back, and one of the first things he hears is that Tobiah is living in the Temple. Do you remember Tobiah? First off, he was an Ammonite, which Nehemiah reminded us at the top of the chapter, were a people group specifically EXCLUDED from the Temple. They had been just horrible to the Israelites when they were journeying through the desert, not giving them any assistance, fighting them and trying to call down curses on them. The Ammonites were bad news.

Secondly, Tobiah was one of the main enemies all through the rebuilding process. He was the face of opposition. He had been dead set against everything Nehemiah had tried to do. And now, here he is – living in the heart of the city. Not just in the city – in space normally devoted to God.

This is not a good sign. And as Nehemiah looks around more, he finds that several other things have deteriorated in his absence. Here are some examples:

**Nehemiah 13:10**

*I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.*

**Nehemiah 13:15**

*In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath...*

**Nehemiah 13:23**

*Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.*

So...services at the Temple were being neglected., the Sabbath was no longer being observed, and they're back to marrying foreign enemies, which they had specifically committed to NOT doing. By the way -- this commitment wasn't out of any kind of racism – it was because all those other nations had their own idols, and marrying into their families meant people were abandoning the worship of God left and right.

In short, the people are back where they were at the beginning of the book. All the big promises they made to be true to God, all the reforms and the progress and the passion are gone. It makes you wish Nehemiah had just written his book when he returned to Babylon and not bothered going back to Jerusalem. Why ruin the good memories and the happy ending?

You can see why I wasn't looking forward to chapter 13. It feels depressing. But to leave that part of the story out would have been less than true. The reality is that the people failed again. In fact, this was just one of countless times the Bible records of how God's people went through this cycle of sin and repentance followed by more of the same sin. Scripture is brutally honest about how frequently the pattern repeated itself.

And it wasn't just the Israelites who had that pattern: that's been the human condition since the Garden of Eden. I don't know about you, but I find that I trip over the same sins all the time. Struggles seem to hang on and on and we go, "Where's the win, God? Aren't we supposed to have victory over sin as Christians? Shouldn't we be feeling more progress and seeing quicker change in each other's lives?"

In a way, I suppose it is comforting to read through this chapter, because it lets us know we're not alone. Everyone slips up. But on the other hand, the jaded side of me wants to know what the point of even trying is if you know eventually you'll slide back into old patterns. Where is the hope?

So I was really wrestling with what to say about the text, and I prayed, "God, show me where to go with this, because I'm not seeing it."

And guess what? He did it! I was reading a commentary on this chapter, and the author made this brief reference to how something Nehemiah did paralleled something Jesus did. And all of a sudden it clicked. I had been focusing my attention on the wrong part of the story. I had only been looking at the bad choices of the people, which of course was discouraging with its predictability.

But when I turned to look more closely at Nehemiah and what he did through all this, I caught a glimpse of Jesus that was full of hope. In fact, I can't think of anything I'd rather wrap up this series with than what this chapter gives us, because it is a reminder of Christ's character and work. And if Nehemiah has one legacy to leave with us, that is it.

When I had that in mind to look for, it was everywhere. I found five distinct ways Nehemiah points us to Jesus in this chapter. Amazingly, they all start with the letter R. I've never been a big fan of sermons with cute word gimmicks, so I always feel a little

apologetic when my points line up like this. But hopefully the fact that they all begin with the same letter will help them stick in our minds better. It certainly helped me this week as I was preparing.

The first picture I found was in the portion we read earlier:

*Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. 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.*

Does this scene sound familiar? It's a lot like the time Jesus got angry and cleared the Temple. The money changers had all these tables set up, and Jesus knocked them over and threw them out. Nehemiah's anger over Tobiah captures the truth that **Jesus roots out the enemy**.

How in the world did Tobiah come to have a home in the Temple? It seems so obviously wrong for the priest to have allowed it. But I imagine it seemed harmless at the time, maybe even helpful. There was less less grain coming in from the people, so there was extra room. Tobiah probably offered to pay some rent, which seemed like it could be a good idea to offset some bills. After all, the money had to come from somewhere, right? It would have been easy to justify looking the other way and accommodating him.

But Nehemiah saw right through all the rationalization. He didn't care about the money – all he could see was that a place sacred to God had been handed over to God's enemy. So he did something about it. Nehemiah didn't just get rid of Tobiah – he got rid of everything associated with him. And then he had the whole place fumigated practically, going through the purification process like we talked about last week.

Sometimes we don't even recognize how much room in our hearts we've given to the enemy. Paul talks about how we need to be careful not to give the devil a foothold, and he says one place that can happen is in our anger. It's easy to rationalize our reactions to wrongs we suffer. But sometimes we don't realize that as we're responding, we're also opening up the door for Satan to worm his way in and set up camp. Pretty soon bitterness and an unforgiving spirit settle over us. And what was once a heart soft toward God has now become hardened. Room for him to work has been given over to someone else.

When we have invited Christ into our lives, he constantly looks around to see what doesn't belong there. He is passionate about God's temple (which is us) being a place where he is glorified.

How does he do that? By changing things in us to the point where the devil is no longer comfortable. Previous habits and patterns won't feel right anymore. The more we allow Christ to work, the less hospitable our hearts are for evil.

Is there an area of your life where you are feeling spiritual discomfort this morning?  
What is Jesus wanting to boot to the curb?

Sometimes when we think about Jesus cleansing out our lives, we only think about what he's got to get rid of, not realizing that he's really just getting rid of it to make room for what belonged there all along. This is the second picture Nehemiah shows us, which is that **Jesus refills what's been emptied.**

### **Nehemiah 13:10-13**

*I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.*

*All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms. I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because these men were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their brothers.*

The Levites who worked at the Temple were dependent on the offerings brought in to support them. But nothing was coming in and the Levites were going hungry. Here were these servants of God who were having to scrounge around for food. So what does Nehemiah do? He restocks the pantry. He loaded it up with grain and wine and oil, then put someone in charge to make sure the supply wouldn't run out again.

When we neglect our spirit, we can feel empty and hollow. Like Nehemiah, Jesus is concerned about feeding us.

The Scriptures are full of language that refers to this idea:

- You prepare a table before me.
- My God shall supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.
- He has filled the hungry with good things.
- His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness.

And Jesus himself said:

### **Matthew 4:4**

*It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*

He is interested in nourishing that deepest hunger in our spirit that nothing else can touch. And it is his only his word that has the capacity to do that. When Scripture gets down inside of us, it has this uncanny ability to strengthen us like nothing else.

My Grandpa Peabody had his first heart surgery at the age of 51. My dad and grandma were visiting him afterwards in the hospital one day. He was sitting up and looking good, when suddenly he grabbed his head in pain, fell back on the pillow and slipped into a coma for two weeks. While he was in it, he experienced the most intense fear of his life. He described it as being like a thick dark cloud over him. He wasn't afraid of dying, but he didn't want to go out without a word from the Lord. He was trying desperately to think of a Bible verse, and he couldn't remember a single one. There was just this huge emptiness. That's pretty incredible, because Grandpa had been memorizing Scripture his entire life. And he began to panic at the void that was so black.

But then in his desperation, one verse came to him from the Lord: "I will never leave you or forsake you." As soon as those words came into his heart, he said it was like the clouds and darkness rolled back. They broke through the fear and gave him peace. And he realized that Jesus had experienced that darkness and forsakenness so he didn't have to. And there in that coma, God's word strengthened his spirit when nothing else in the world could reach him.

Many of you here today can testify to a time when Jesus brought just the right word to you exactly when you were needing to be filled up. If you're feeling depleted this morning, know that Jesus cares and desires to see you fed. He is still in the business of preparing a table for us.

Nehemiah then turned his attention to a third concern.

### **Nehemiah 13:15-16, 19-21**

*In those days I saw men 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. Men 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...*

*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. Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. But I warned them and said, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you." From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.*

Much could be said about this situation, but what stood out to me was how fiercely Nehemiah was committed to protecting and safeguarding the concept of rest for the people. He was ready to fight for it when the people were still there at the gates, trying to

push the limits. He took a no compromise stance. I think that's a beautiful reminder that **Jesus restores our rest.**

The people of Jerusalem knew the commandments well. This Sabbath one was pretty clear. They weren't supposed to work on the seventh day. It was their day of rest. But there was so many things you could get done in that extra day! So many opportunities to make money and provide for themselves. It came down to a matter of trust: Could they believe that God could take care of their needs for them if they chose to rest like he said?

That's the same issue for us. I'm not talking about taking a day off – I'm talking about resting spiritually in what Jesus has done for us. Do we trust it? On the one hand, we know that Jesus died for our sins. But we still feel like we have to earn God's blessing, because that's how we're used to making our way in the world. It can mask itself as people pleasing, where we feel we have to work extra hard to be good enough. And we're so used to performance equaling results that we press even harder to make sure things go our way. Dr. Larry Crabb says this:

*The secular journey is rooted in...the bondage of control: do this and that will happen. That's how things work. You can have the life you want if you live wisely and well.*

*The spiritual journey is rooted in liberty, the freedom of grace: Come as you are, trembling, and learn to rest. Then go out into life doing what's right because you're privileged to do so, because you want to be holy, not because doing right is the way to a pleasant life. Life may provide rich blessings. Or it may not. Either way you can know God.*

Resting is letting go of the expectations we put on ourselves that God himself doesn't burden us with. Resting means slowing down long enough to be still and feel life rather than outrun it. Resting is coming to grips with just how impossible it would ever be to be good enough for God – and gratefully trusting that Jesus was more than good enough.

Author Mark Buchannan writes, *God's solution is surprising. He offers rest. But it's a unique form of rest. It's to rest in him in the midst of our threats and our burdens. It's discovering, as David did in seasons of distress, that God is our rock and refuge right in the thick of our situation.*

Jesus says come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. He is our rest. And he calls us back to himself and says my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

As Nehemiah continued to look around at what the people were doing, something else bothered him greatly.

### **Nehemiah 13:23-27**

*Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. 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. 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: "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. 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. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God...?"*

This does not sound like a very pretty picture of Nehemiah. You might have just lost a little respect for him. He attacks these men so viciously, beating them and pulling their hair. The thought of it can be distracting and it feels completely inappropriate from our place in history.

The thing is, we're more shocked by Nehemiah's behavior than we are by what the people were doing. We shake our head at him and don't even blink about what made him react that way. And I think that reflects his frustration. He cared so deeply about this issue, and the people were completely indifferent. It all comes down to that question Nehemiah asked them.

*Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God...?*

This wasn't about marriage – it was about idolatry. It was about being unfaithful to God himself. These people who God had rescued were giving their love away not just to foreign women – but to foreign gods. It's as if they're saying, "I know you did all these miracles for us, forgave us over and over, saved us from our enemies and all that, but I have this little clay statue now that I think I'll worship instead." They are selling out to something that couldn't even begin to save them.

What Nehemiah portrays for us here is that **Jesus requires our whole heart.**

Jesus wants our hearts to be wholly committed to him, and he will expose those false loves in our lives that would compete for our affections. Beth Moore puts it this way:

*Here's the deal: God wants everything you've got. Uncontested priority. Every egg in one basket. All your weight on one limb. This very moment he has his fingers gripped on your chin, saying, "Right here, child. Look right here. Don't look right or left. Stare straight into my face. I am your Deliverer. There is none like me."*

*God will be your complete Deliverer or nothing at all.*

Jesus wants our whole heart. What am I thinking is going to save me? What do I need to be delivered from?

When everything is said and done, Nehemiah ends his entire book with this one statement:

**Nehemiah 13:31**

*Remember me with favor, O my God.*

Several times throughout the chapter, he says something similar. Remember what I've done God. Remember how I've stood up for these people. Here is this man who is well into his older years now. He has tirelessly been fighting the same battles over and over again for the Israelites. As discouraging as it must have been that they hadn't changed, he doesn't complain to God about them. He doesn't want God to keep track of all their sins. Instead he asks God to remember the good things he, Nehemiah has done instead.

This is perhaps the greatest way that Nehemiah resembles Jesus, because above all else, **Jesus reminds our God.**

What I mean by that is that Jesus asks God to remember what he has done and not what we've done. Forgive them, Father. They don't know what they're doing. Remember my work instead. He draws the Father's attention away from our failures and onto his perfection. There's an old hymn I love that says,

*And now for me he stands before his Father's throne  
And shows his wounded hands and claims me as his own.*

That's beautiful. God is constantly remembering the awesome work Jesus did on the cross, and it is a big enough memory that it drowns out the memory of our sins.

**Jeremiah 31:34**

*...I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more.*

Chapter 13 of Nehemiah puts a choice directly in front of us. We can look at the failures of the people, the failures of ourselves. We can be caught up in the endless cycle of empty promises and regrets, valiant efforts and horrible crashes. That's the stark reality of the human condition, and every one of us is a part of it.

But there's a bright spot. We can look instead to Jesus the way Nehemiah portrays him. We can find hope in knowing that he stands between us and God, always saying, "Remember me. Forgive them, and remember me."

Which picture of Jesus are you most needing this morning?

Do you need him to fight your enemy for you?

Do you need to be filled up?

Do you need to find rest?

Does he have your heart?