

The finale of the story was last week. That's where the book should have ended. A raucous celebration of God's transforming presence and grace. A church service to end all church services. But tragically, that's not where the story ends. The actual end of the story is somewhat anti-climactic.

Remember from week 1 we said that the purpose of this book was two-fold: 1) to show us timeless principles of application in the Christian life. It is remarkable to think just how applicable an ancient book like this is to the modern believer.

But it's second purpose was to show us the futility of perfected religion. They could not have realized Judiac-Temple worship better than they did. They probably could not have had more sincere, humble, conscientious leaders than they had.

But they are missing the one thing that only the Messiah could give them—the promise of the Father. The Holy Spirit's presence poured out on every single person who believes.

The Main Text: 13:29-30

The Main Idea: Despite the fervent efforts in revival under Ezra and Nehemiah, the people relapse into old patterns. This shows their need for a true transformation of the heart. They are back in the land, back from Babylon. But exile is not over by any means. Humanity has been exiled from the garden of God's manifest presence. And while they have enjoyed glimpses of it, certain men and women have been anointed carriers of it—the Spirit is yet to be poured out on all people—all who believe.

Background:

- **Nehemiah's return to Persia (13:6).** "I had gone back to the king. After some time I had requested leave of the king,"

Principles for Today:

1. In the absence of leadership, the people experience mission-drift (13:7-12).

and I returned to Jerusalem. Then I discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah by supplying him with a storeroom in the courts of the temple of God. Eliashib is renting out a storage unit to an ammonite official, who had earlier had opposed Nehemiah's effort to rebuild.

¹⁰ I also discovered that the grain offerings for the Levites had not been provided, and that as a result the Levites and the singers who performed this work had all gone off to their fields. ¹¹ So I registered a complaint with the leaders, asking "Why is the temple of God neglected?"

Nehemiah has been gone for some time, having returned to Artaxerxes. Likely reporting how well everything had gone. When we last saw the Israelites, they were rejoicing and praising God so loud that the sound could be heard from far away.

The temple storehouse was full and ritually cleansed with holy provisions.

The temple priests and levites are in their places to preside over Israel's national religion.

Nehemiah has returned to discover the people have drifted from their God-given mission.

Often this is the role of the leader. It is keep everyone on the right track. To keep ministries in alignment with the one mission God has given us.

Our Mission: Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus who gather to worship in Spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:23), who grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18), and who go into the world proclaiming the Gospel (Mt. 28:19-20). Let's take a few minutes and unpack that:

To gather in worship in Spirit and Truth: As a church, we are an assembly by nature. We've assembled in the name of Christ to bring glory and praise to the one true God of the universe. And we are to do this, as Jesus told the Samaritan woman in Jn 4 "In Spirit and in Truth." *Which I think means enabled by the Holy Spirit—transformed people engaging in life-transforming activity.* And that worship enabled by God's Spirit needs also to be informed by the Truth. God's Word and no other standard. We hold everything we do up to the light of his Word.

We grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18): But as we gather, our leadership here at CCC is on a mission to equip people with the tools they need to grow. The truth is, we can't disciple you here at the church. We can equip you to take it home, put it into the mix of your life—we only have you and your family for an hour or two and that is not enough to make anyone a disciple of Jesus. It's only enough time to outfit you with the tools, some skills, some knowledge, and the relationships you need to be disciple in the context of life.

- **Illus. My friend's baby at death's door.** I remember the doctor giving us the news: factual but empathetic.

We scatter back out there—going into the world to reach the lost. Jesus did not "host an event" and make disciples. Now there's nothing inherently wrong with hosting an event. Now I love a good Beth Moore simulcast as much as the next gal. Nothing inherently wrong with that.

He didn't say, "get a degree—from seminary—and make disciples."

Jesus said, "Go" scatter into the world. Disciples are made in life, in neighborhoods, in vocation—disciples are equipped here—at the gathering.

So, it's my job and the job of our pastors and elders to make sure that as a church we are all aligned for this same purpose.

The people in Nehemiah's day have experienced mission-drift. Without Nehemiah there to guide them they are just spiritually atrophying. Drifting back into old habits of syncretism, idolatry, and preoccupation.

Illus. I find that, as a Father, when I reengage, the atmosphere changes. Our family mission is to love God and serve God together (unity) faithfully. But when I'm busy, too wrapped up in work, or study, or fun projects—I notice our unity atrophies—our sense of devotion and faithfulness to God wanes. As a busy dad I have to remember to stay engaged with the family because when I do—the atmosphere changes. We get back on mission.

2. In the absence of the Spirit's transforming, empowering presence—the people lapse into familiar habits (13:15).

¹⁵ In those days I saw people in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath, bringing in heaps of grain and loading them onto donkeys, along with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, and bringing them to Jerusalem on the Sabbath day.

“What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day?”

The reason for this is because they have lacked strong leadership to keep them on track, but it's also natural and normal to become distracted by the demands of a busy life.

Jesus warned of this in the parable of the sower. The seed sown among the stuff that choke out the word, or the rocks in the soil that keep the roots from going deeper. So the crop is easily scorched when trials come.

1 Corinthians 7:35 I am saying this for your benefit, not to place restrictions on you. I want you to do whatever will help you serve the Lord best, with as few distractions as possible.

Following Jesus' model “Hebrews 12:2 fixing our attention on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith, who, in view of the joy set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

And Paul's, “This one thing I do...”

But the people in Nehemiah's day don't have access universally to God's transforming, empowering presence. But we do.

We don't have to go to a temple to experience God's presence—we are the living temple (1 Cor. 3; 6; Eph 1).

We don't have to wait for an official prophet to deliver “thus saith the Lord” to us—because we have his Word and God speaks through his book.

Without God's transforming presence personally, the people are more prone than ever to return back to old habits.

But what about the people who have God's Spirit?

3. The Spirit of God sets us free from the power of sin (Rom. 6, 7).

Romans 6:1 “6 What shall we say then? Are we to remain in sin so that grace may increase? ² Absolutely not! **How can we who died to sin still live in it?** ⁶ We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ (For someone who has died has been freed from sin.) ¹² **Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires, ¹³ and do not present your members to sin as instruments to be used for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and your members to God as instruments to be used for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no mastery over you, because you are not under law but under grace.**

The reason why we have this ability to resist becoming distracted, to resist falling into mission-drift away from God's purpose for our lives is because we have more than positional sanctification. Meaning, we have been sanctified, set apart, made holy as children of God, adopted into his family.

But the Spirit has transformed us, is transforming and will transform us ultimately in the resurrection.

Paul believed this and stated directly, “sin is no longer to be your master.” You and I have victory over sin. It has not been eradicated from the Christian's life—the sinful nature has not suddenly vanished. Christians are tempted, we struggle with old sinful patterns and attitudes, and sometimes we fail, miserably. But we are not obligated to the flesh to obey its sinful desires, we are not bound by it so that failure is inevitable, and we are no longer condemned by the law.

But this just wasn't true in Nehemiah's day. The story wasn't over yet. Nehemiah's story anticipated an ultimate fulfillment in which the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh and now every believer can walk victoriously over the passions of the flesh; the distractions of this age.

4. Having been set free from the power of sin, we are enabled to walk “according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4-6).

In 7:6 Paul states his thesis for that section in Romans: “⁶ But now we have been released from the law, because we have died to what controlled us, so that we may serve in the new way of the Spirit and not under the old written code.”

He then proceeds to describe, not the best possible Christian life in Ch. 7, but the best possible Pharisaic life—knowing the law, loving the law—totally dogged and dominated by the sinful flesh activated by the law.

He cries out “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this dead body—where every fleshly desire in my wars against my soul?”

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord:

- 8:1 **We are not condemned: Positional/Legal status.** There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The power of God's Spirit has set you free from the power of sin and death. Why no condemnation? Because the righteous requirements of the law have been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. He fulfilled it.
- 8:8 **We are not carnal.** “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, this person does not belong to him. ¹¹ Moreover if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the

The courage to change what needs to change when God says it's time to change
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dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also make your mortal bodies alive through his Spirit who lives in you.”

- 8:11 **We will be raised to life to sin no more.** “Who is the one who will condemn? Christ is the one who died (and more than that, he was raised), who is at the right hand of God, and who also is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ?”

Paul's Summary: 8:4 “so that the righteous requirement of the law may be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

The term “walk” has a particular meaning for Paul. He had been raised in the *Halakah*—the word Halakah means, “The walk.” It is the comprehensive way of life prescribed by the Sanhedrin for the Jew.

They “walked according to the law.” An attempt to obey it in all the particulars.

They “walked according to the oral laws” the body of traditions outside the Bible that governed their interpretation and application of Mosaic law.

They “walked according to the flesh” meaning, their entire way of life was informed by the sign of circumcision. Circumcision told them they were pious, devout Jewish males—they, and not the pagans—had been physically conformed in the flesh which set them apart as God's people.

But Paul says that the typical devout Jew was actually powerless to live up to the law in all its complexity. Just knowing the command said, “Do not covet” was a one way ticket to coveting. Because the command has awoken the sleeping Rottweiler in me. The command makes me “conscious of sin” (Rom 3:21). It doesn't lift me to live it, it tells me what the standard is and then tells me I can't, no matter how hard I try, ever keep it all, flawlessly and blamelessly.

But now we walk according to the Spirit. We have received a new identity by the Spirit. We have received a new law, the law of love and life in Christ Jesus. We have received a new covenant—sons by adoption.

5. When we walk according to the Spirit, we reflect the character of Christ (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:22).

Stop calling yourself a sinner saved by grace. Doesn't mean you weren't a sinner. And it doesn't mean you don't still sin.

But Paul never identifies the church this way. In Nehemiah's day, people had will power, they had the covenants of Moses and Abraham—they had their land, and now their temple and city were rebuilt.

But they had received what Jeremiah prophesied about—a new heart in place of granite stone.

They hadn't received what Ezekiel talked about—the Spirit blowing through dry dead, lifeless bones rattling us back to life.

But we have.

You'd expect after reading Nehemiah Chapters 11-12 for the Messiah—God's anointed King to come right on the heels of that Great, raucous worship celebration. Right on the heels of that event—Jesus would come and bring salvation, return from spiritual exile for humanity—to renew all things and defeat every enemy of God and humanity.

But at the end of the story—the lights go down, the curtain closes—and we realize there will be a 400 year intermission before the finale of the story.

Acts 2 “But when the day of Pentecost came, they were all together and the sound of a mighty wind...”

Peter said, “this is that... This what you see is that thing that was prophesied about by Joel and the prophets.

In the last days I'm going to pour out my Spirit on all flesh. And now all men can encounter God as a present transforming reality.

All people can experience him who saves us, encourages us, empowers us and builds us up in the holy faith.