

# How to Stop the Slide of Backsliding

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**Series:** Nehemiah (Building a City Within the City)

**Introduction:** The believer in Jesus Christ is constantly growing. We are not in any way sinless, but we ought to be sinning less. If you find yourself not sinning less, then chastening is coming your way. God will do what it takes to bring you to your knees not because He is cruel, but because He is the most tender compassionate Being in the universe. He wants you to be what He saved you to be. He wants you to confront sin in your life.

**Illustration:** Mention the word 'perestroika' in Russia today, and you will be greeted with cynicism. The reason is quite obvious. In his book, then Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev made frequent reference to the credibility gap between words and deeds. He insisted that people did not want political slogans that failed to square with reality.

'Perestroika' means, "The unity of words and deeds," and on that basis Gorbachev attempted to reform the Soviet system. It was a noble aim, but for the Russian people, its failure was painfully evident. The unity between political promises and social reality was a myth; therein, bringing the downfall of Gorbachev's administration.<sup>1</sup>

Every day we watch inconsistency lived out before us on the world's stage. We hear people say one thing; and, then, watch people do another thing. All sorts of promises are given, but not many promises are kept. That is how corporate ladders are climbed, positions are gained, and elections are won.

The sad reality is that the same is at times true of the lives of many struggling Christians. There are times in our lives when because we are not confronting sin urgently and honestly in our lives, that the Word of God seems to lose its power, and the voice of the Holy Spirit seems dull and distant.

I want to encourage you tonight to be a consistent Christian.

Nehemiah found a similar situation after a long time away from Jerusalem. The people had pledged to remain holy and surrendered to God. Upon Nehemiah's return he found some disturbing news. The people had fallen into sin. Nehemiah confronts the problems head on.

I want to urge you tonight to confront problems in your life head on. A small area of stubbornness in your life right now may one day ruin your marriage. It may cause you to dry up spiritually. It may lead you to other sins. We need to stay tender and humble daily before the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> "Faith in the Face of Danger," Jonathan Lamb, pg. 110.

Nehemiah takes a sabbatical to return to Artaxerxes to give a report of the progress in Jerusalem. When he first obtained permission from Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem, Nehemiah had "set him a time." (2: 6)

Nehemiah had been governor of Jerusalem for 12 years, and the "set" time for his return had come.

Look at **verse 6**, "But in all this time was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king."

We don't know how long Nehemiah was gone; however, upon his return, Nehemiah encounters some major changes—and they are NOT good. He sees a people who have backslidden—people who have lost their first love.

God allows will at times discipline His children by allowing them to have what they want. If you say you want to taste the world, be careful God may give it to you. Before we unpack this chapter, I want you to see this in **Jeremiah 2:19**, "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee". Here's the thing, you don't want God to give you the desires of your flesh! The worst thing God can give us sometimes is what we in our weak flesh want to desire. If a Christian backslides, it is only to make him sick of his own sin! God loves us to allow us to go too far, so he allows some for a time to backslide.

## **I. How does Backsliding begin?**

It had been almost 20 years since the people made a covenant with God that was signed by 84 men in Nehemiah 10. When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, for his 2nd term as governor, he immediately finds things are out of order.

### **A. Backsliding begins by **DISOBEYING the WORD of God****

Before Nehemiah had given his report to the king, we have a clear record of the people's understanding of the Word of God. They knew they were to be yoked (harnessed) together with believers only.

#### **Nehemiah 13**

[1-3] "On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever. [2]Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing. [3]Now it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude."

The Word of God clearly prohibited them from allowing the pagan nations of the

world to infiltrate the ranks of God's people. There was no gray area when it came to this matter; it was crystal clear.

However, the people disobeyed the Word of God. First, we see it in their family.

### **1. It shows up in our Marriages.**

[23] "In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab."

The Word of God made clear that the Jews were to have no dealings with the descendants of Ammon and Moab; but, to add insult to injury, not only had the Jews allowed them to infiltrate the ranks, but they had even exchanged *wedding vows with the enemies of God*.

As a result, what was supposed to be a Spirit-filled multitude became a "mixed multitude." [3] The term always speaks of the ungodly who have mixed in with God's people.

The Bible is even clearer today regarding the "mixed multitude." The purpose of separation in God's Word has to do with spirituality, not ethnicity.

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6: 14)

The phrase "yoked together" is a picture borrowed from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. The law forbade plowing a field using different kinds of animals. For example, an ox and a donkey would both pull, but they would pull at different speeds; thus, proving to be ineffective when harnessed together.<sup>2</sup>

When the Bible says that believers are not to be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers," *it is because believers and unbelievers are pulling, and being pulled, in opposite directions*. A believer seeks to pull toward the things of God, while an unbeliever seeks to pull toward the things of the world, and the flesh.

Contextually, it applies to business relationships, but it can also apply to marriage. A Christian is not to be "unequally yoked together," in marriage, with a non-Christian. It will be a constant tug-of-war. They will pull in opposite directions. If you are considering marriage to an unsaved person, you would be wise to heed the Word of God, and get out of that relationship.

**Application:** I don't know how many times I have heard someone say, "Pastor, I know that they are unsaved, but once we're married, I'll get them in

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 126.

church, and they'll get saved." But, if it ever happens, and it rarely does, it will take years and years because they are pulling against each other in opposite directions.

**Application to the church:** However, not only does the term "mixed multitude" apply to marriage, but it also applies to the church. We take for granted that on requirement of church membership is to be born again. The "mixed multitude" is composed of unsaved people who want to belong to the fellowship of God's people, without trusting the Lord or submitting to His will.

Somebody once famously said, "Satan is not fighting churches today, HE IS JOINING THEM!" It makes us wonder if that is the reason for so many problems in the church today.

2. Our disobedience of the Word shows up in our **Children**. *This doesn't mean if you have disobedient children that you are to blame.* I'm not saying that. Each child makes their own choice. But we can certainly say that if we neglect our walk with God it almost inevitably shows up in our children.

It was so with the children of Israel. They disobeyed the Word of God, notice the result.

[verse 24] "And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people."

Because they had inter-married with the enemies of God, their children would not be able to speak the right language.

At this point, Hebrew was the language of the Scripture; thus, because they would not be able to speak the Jews', or the Hebrew language, the children would not be able to glean from the Bible.

As a result, the Israelite identity would be eroded because the children could not understand God's Word, and their uniqueness as followers of the ONE LORD would gradually be dissolved.

**Application:** Brothers and sisters, we owe it to our children, grand-children, and great-children to instill in them the truth of God, and cultivate in them a heart for the things of God. Don't raise your children by what Brittany Spears sings; raise your children by what the Bible says.

- I have had parents come to me and say, "*Now pastor, we don't want to be legalistic and place a bunch of rules on our children. We want them to develop their own identity and character.*" I sure don't want

them to develop on their own. I want them to be in the MOULD of Christ!

- Raising your family on the Bible and around the things of God is not a matter of legalism; it's a matter of LOVE! Do you want them to grow up and be thugs, rebels, criminals, and jail birds; or, do you want them to grow up with a heart for God and a love for Jesus that burns with passion?

Then, we must bear the responsibility of obeying what God says, because whenever the Word of God is neglected, the door of compromise, corruption, and confusion swings wide open.

They disobeyed the Word of God...

B. Secondly, Backsliding continues by: **DISGRACING the HOUSE of God.** As folk get out of step with God in their personal life, they begin to neglect the fellowship of the saints. You can't hide it if your personal walk with God is in shambles. It will eventually come out. You will begin withdrawing from the extra fellowships of the church. You will start turning down those private opportunities to fellowship in the houses of the saints. You will start to make friends with the world again. This is how backsliding begins. So it was with the Jewish people.

Do you remember the promise they made to God?

[10:39] "We will not forsake the house of our God."

Look at how that promise went unfulfilled.

[verse 4-5] "And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, was allied unto **Tobiah**. [5]And he had prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil, which was commanded to be given to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the offerings of the priests."

[verse 7] "And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God."

Tobiah was an enemy of God, and God's people. He, with Sanballat, had opposed the work of God, as well as the workers of God from the very start. Yet, we read that *Eliashib, the priest, formed an alliance with an enemy of God.* And as if that wasn't bad enough, he even made an apartment in the Temple for **Tobiah** (an Ammonite-a Gentile) to live. –**Psalm 1:1**, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the

seat of the scornful.”

**Application:** We must be careful to walk close to **God and His people**. We need the assembly of the saints! We must edify each other. If we don't receive that edification we are prone to stray back to the world. We need to **sing** with all our hearts together as we are commanded. Singing is a way of admonishing one another! We must **listen** and then we must study the Word during the week. If we misuse what God has given us, we will lose the Gospel's power in our lives. And then the world and the enemy will move in!

They disobeyed the Word of God. They disgraced the house of God. And, they:

- C. Backsliding is also seen by: **DISHONORING the DAY of God**. Once you cut off the fellowship of God's people, you will begin dishonoring the day of God. Do you remember the fourth commandment? “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy”. John the Apostle told us the Christians met, in memoriam of Christ's resurrection, on the first day of the week. Actually according to history, we know that most churches met early in the morning and then again late on Sunday night. Some of the Jewish church actually met every single day, but had extended services on Sundays.

The Jewish people, as their backsliding became more serious, they began dishonoring the Lord's Day. Listen to their promise to God again in chapter 10: 31, “We would not buy it of them on the Sabbath, or on the holy day.”

But look what Nehemiah saw when he came back from Persia: [verse 15] “In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals.”

Look at what he says in **verse 17**, “What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the Sabbath day?”

Simply put, the people were working, buying and selling on the Sabbath day. Nehemiah came back to Jerusalem, after a sabbatical probably a couple years, and saw loads of grain being hauled in and out of the gates, and all sorts of business being conducted on a day deemed holy to the Lord. How he must have shaken his head in disappointment and disbelief.

**Application:** You'll know you are in deep trouble when you can take your leave of God's people on God's Day.

But, not only do we see what he finds, but notice:

- II. How is Backsliding **BROKEN**? First if you see yourself backsliding, like the

Lord tells the seven churches in Asia Minor, you need to “be zealous and repent”.

When Nehemiah came back to Jerusalem he found that the people had disobeyed the Word of God, disgraced the house of God, and dishonored the day of God. Not content to allow things to remain as they were, he began to fix the problem:

A. We need to confront sin in our life **IMMEDIATELY**.

There is a word that we encounter, through the chapter that leads us to believe that as soon as Nehemiah became aware of areas of spiritual decay, he immediately sought out a solution. It is the word "THEN!" Nehemiah took action immediately.

[9] "**Then** I commanded."

[11] "**Then** contended I with the rulers."

[12] "**Then** brought all Judah the tithe."

[17] "**Then** I contended with the nobles."

[21] "**Then** I testified against them."

Nehemiah understood that the spiritual welfare of His people hanged in the balance; thus, when it came to the things of God, there could be no deliberation; there could be no denial, because there could be no delay. It had to be fixed; and, it had to be fixed now.

Jesus commands His churches in Asia minor to “be zealous and repent”.

- Revelation 2:5 **Remember** therefore from whence thou art fallen, and **repent**, and **do the first works**; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou **repent**.
- Revelation 2:16 **Repent**; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will **fight against them with the sword of my mouth**.
- Revelation 3:3 **Remember** therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and **repent**.
- Revelation 3:19 **As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous** therefore, and **repent**.

B. We need to confront sin in our life **COURAGEOUSLY**.

While the people may have become **insensitive**, Nehemiah became **indignant**. He was outraged over the unfulfilled promises of the people. Thus, immediately and courageous he begins to fix the problem.

When he learned that Eliashib had disgraced the house of God by making a studio apartment for **Tobiah** in, of all places, the Temple, Nehemiah courageously took the problem by the horns.

[8-9] "And it grieved me sore: therefore **I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber.** [9] Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and thither brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense."

[11-13] "And I gathered them together, and set them in their place. [12] **Then brought all Judah the tithe of the corn and the new wine and the oil unto the treasuries.** [13] And I made treasurers over the treasuries."

He took extreme measures and put in measures of accountability.

When Tobiah came back home that night, he found that all his stuff had been thrown out, and was lying in the street. Nehemiah had the attitude, "*I don't care if it means losing votes as governor. I'm not here to be popular, I'm here to do right; and, I will not allow the house of God to be disgraced.*"

When he discovered that the people had dishonored the Sabbath day of God, he courageously took the problem by the horns.

[19-22] "And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath, **I commanded that the gates should be shut,** and charged that they should not be opened till after the Sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the Sabbath day. [20] So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice. [21] Then I testified against them, and said unto them, **Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.** From that time forth came they no more on the Sabbath. [22] And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates."

Nehemiah shut down the Sabbath day flea market. He ordered the gates shut at sun down, and not re-opened until after the Sabbath. Then, he appointed men to stand guard on the gates to enforce the new rule.

Furthermore, he looked to the "merchants and sellers" who hung out on the wall and said, "If you boys do it again, I will 'lay my hands on you.'" In Chicago vernacular, he said, "I'll put you in the can—in jail—if I see you here again on the Lord's Day!"

C. We need to confront sin in our life **SERIOUSLY.**

When he discovered that the Jews had disobeyed the Word of God by marrying Ammonites and Moabites, he courageously took the problem seriously.

[25] "And I **contended** with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and **plucked [shaved] off their hair,** and made them swear by God, saying, **Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.**"

The word "contended" means, "To plead a case." In other words, Nehemiah rebuked the Jews for their disobedience to God's Word. He gave them a history lesson regarding the downfall of Solomon.

Then, to make sure they knew he was serious, after the sentencing ("cursed them"), there was the smiting, the disgracing ("plucked off their hair"), and the swearing ("made them swear by God"). There was a public accounting of those who were responsible.

In the New Testament, we see a spirit of accountability in **Matthew 18**. We are to hold each other accountable for any sin. We are to confront each other in love privately. If there is not response, then we are to go with a witness. If they do not listen you bring it to the pastor and then to the church.

Some will say, "Now, pastor, we need to love each other." I agree wholeheartedly. *Love does not excuse sin; rather, love exposes sin, and expels sin.* Nehemiah loved God, and he loved God's people, which is why he fixed the problem immediately and courageously.

*Application:* What is it in your life you need to fix immediately? What is it in your heart you need to confront courageously? It takes a man to admit the error of his ways, and an even greater to be willing to do whatever needs to be done to fix it.

### **III. Finally let us consider how to keep from Backsliding.**

While the legacy of Nehemiah has been indelibly left on the printed page of the Word of God; it has also been left on the hearts of God's people then, as well as now.

We have traveled from Susa to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem back to Susa, and from Susa back to Jerusalem with Nehemiah. We have watched his life develop from a cupbearer to a builder to a governor; but, all because he was a leader.

However, the legacy of Nehemiah is forever remembered as a man who started for the finish, and who finished what he started. As the curtain falls on the book, we see him as true to God in his final years, as he was in his first years.

#### **A. Stay close to God in Prayer.**

One of the most overlooked aspects of Nehemiah is his prayer life. There are a total of 12 prayers recorded in the book, and each prayer was the prayer of a faithful man of God.

You will remember, when we first meet Nehemiah, he is in prayer. Now, as the book closes, we find him in prayer; and, he has been in prayer all throughout the

book.

Nehemiah is famous for what some call "**Telegraph Prayers.**" These were short, yet simple prayers of an urgent nature. However, these emergency prayers were not prayed by a man who only talked to God when he needed, or wanted Him.

Rather, these emergency prayers were backed up by a man who stayed in constant and consistent contact with God. I believe Nehemiah's prayer life reflected something said by C. H. Spurgeon, "I never pray for more than 15 minutes; but, I never go 15 minutes without prayer."

The final prayers of Nehemiah are significant, in that, not only are they filled with content, but with INTENT. In other words, the prayers of a faithful man clearly reveal the passion of a focused man.

[14] "Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices thereof."

[22] "Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy."

[29] "Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites."

[31] "Remember me, O my God, for good."

The passion of Nehemiah's heart was not only to DO right for God, but to BE right with God. Much more concerned was he about pleasing God than pleasing man.

- B. **Stay close to God in Purity.** Don't be afraid to make an unpopular decision if it will protect you from the world. You may be called a legalist in our church. So be it. Only let your heart be right with God and compassionate toward people.

Make sure you are in the Word each day.

Make sure you are in church every time the doors are open.

Take notes of the messages.

Talk of God.

Fellowship with the saints.

Throughout the course of the effort, Nehemiah has made what many would have considered unpopular decisions. However, in the end, Nehemiah prays that God would "remember" him not for gold, greed, or gain; but, for "good."

In other words, the passion of Nehemiah's focus was to bring glory to God, and his life demonstrated what his lips communicated. The Jews may have had style without substance, but not Nehemiah. His proof was in the pudding, and he knew

that God would vindicate him.

[30-31] “Thus cleansed I them from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business; 31 And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits.”

C. **Expect to see God’s blessing and POWER.** Verse 31b, “Remember me, O my God, for good.” You need God to remember you and bless you. You need His very presence and power. If you lack power, ask for the Holy Spirit. **Luke 11:13**, “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?” Ask for His renewed filling and power. Keep yourself pure, and then pray “Fill me, fill me, fill me!”

**Conclusion:** So we have finished the book of Nehemiah. It’s not enough to finish the Christian life, but we must finish strong! If you’ve sensed yourself backsliding, repent. Jesus Christ will forgive you. He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all our unrighteousness. He is our Advocate and friend. He is our propitiation. You need to deal with sin in your life. If you stay close to God, pure and prayerful, God will use you to build a city within our city. You may fall, but you will not be utterly cast down. You may fall seven times, but as a justified person, you will get up again. May God prosper you and bear true spiritual fruit through your life.