

# People Who Turn Back to Sin



## SABBATH—DECEMBER 7

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Nehemiah 13:1–9; Nehemiah 13:10–14; Numbers 18:21–24; Nehemiah 13:15, 16.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “I commanded the Levites to make themselves pure [clean; free from sin]. Then I told them to go and guard [protect] the gates. I wanted the Sabbath day to be kept holy. You are my God. Remember me because of the good things I’ve [I have] done. Be kind to me according [because of] to your great [wonderful] love” (Nehemiah 13:22, NIV).



**Nehemiah fights for change.**  
He helps the people to remember to put God first in their lives and honor Him.

**TIME PASSES** between Nehemiah 12 and Nehemiah 13. During this time, Nehemiah goes back to Babylon. We do not know how long he is gone. Then he comes back to Jerusalem. We think he comes back around 430–425 B.C. When Nehemiah gets home, he learns that many people are sinning. They do all the things they promised not to do! (1) they promised not to marry people who worship false gods. (2) God’s people promised to keep the Sabbath holy. (3) they promised to take care of the temple and its religious leaders. The people promised to support them with gifts and offerings (Nehemiah 10). Now, the people break all those promises they made to God!

When Nehemiah arrives home, he sees that the people are very lazy about serving God. Worst of all, the leaders are lazy too. Their example causes the people to be lazy. So, of course Nehemiah is very upset. But Nehemiah does not accept things as they are. He fights for change. He helps the people to remember to put God first in their lives and honor Him.

**BAD TEMPLE LEADERS (Nehemiah 13:1–9)**

Nehemiah 13 starts with trouble with people from Ammon and Moab (Nehemiah 13:1–3). These people worship idols. Nehemiah 13 does not say that Nehemiah sends away the Ammonites and Moabites because they came from a different country. No, the Ammonites and Moabites must leave because they worship false gods. (Read also Deuteronomy 23:3–6.)

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**Read Nehemiah 13:1–9. As these verses show us, who are Eliashib and Tobiah? What do they do wrong? Why is it wrong? For answers, also look at Nehemiah 2:10, 19; Nehemiah 3:1; Nehemiah 12:10, 22; and Nehemiah 13:28.**

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We see Eliashib and Tobiah a lot in the book of Nehemiah. Eliashib is the high priest or top religious leader for the Jews. Eliashib also is in charge of the temple. Tobiah is from Ammon. He is Nehemiah's enemy. He tried to stop Nehemiah in the past from doing his work in Jerusalem. Eliashib's friendship with Tobiah shows us that they must be connected by marriage. Tobiah must have married a woman from Eliashib's family.

We have no record of Tobiah's marriage to his Jewish wife. But we do know that Tobiah has a Jewish name. The name Tobiah means "the Lord is good." So, this name is a hint that Tobiah comes from a Jewish background. His wife's family is somehow connected to Eliashib's family. But we are not sure how exactly. On top of that, Sanballat the Horonite has a daughter. She is married to Eliashib's grandson. You will remember that Sanballat is one of Nehemiah's enemies. So, the top leaders in the country are now connected to each other by marriage. And they are all against Nehemiah.

While Nehemiah is gone, the high priest, Eliashib, gives one of the rooms in the temple to Tobiah. This room is used to hold gifts and offerings. Eliashib gives Tobiah permission to live in the temple. This room shows everyone that Tobiah is now one of the top leaders in the land of the Jews. All along, Nehemiah's enemies wanted to throw Nehemiah out of office. They wanted to take charge. Now they think they have won! But not if Nehemiah has anything to say about it. He is not going to accept this.



**Eliashib gives Tobiah permission to live in the temple.**

## THE LEVITES IN THE FIELDS (Nehemiah 13:10–14)

**Read Nehemiah 13:10–14. As these verses show, what does Nehemiah want to change?**

The people stop supporting the work in the temple. With no pay, how will the singers, gatekeepers, and other temple servants feed their families? They go back to work in their own fields. Nehemiah is very upset by this news. Everything he did to keep worship going in the temple has stopped. So, Nehemiah must start over. He must convince the people to support the temple again. He must convince the temple workers to come back to work in the temple. No wonder Nehemiah throws all of Tobiah's stuff out of the temple room!

“The temple has been made dirty with sin. The high priest, or top religious leader, did not do right with the gifts from the people. So, the people did not want to give gifts to the temple anymore. Then there was not a lot of money left to take care of the temple. Many of the singers and other temple workers left God's work. They went to work somewhere else.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 670, adapted.

But look what happens after Nehemiah comes back. Everyone in the country comes together. They help build again what the leaders destroyed. The people are on Nehemiah's side against Tobiah and Eliashib. The people know what is in Nehemiah's heart. They know that he loves them and is not selfish. He helped them in the past. He made their lives better. So, they trust him. Nehemiah chooses new people to take care of the temple. He chooses men that he trusts. Nehemiah gives these men the job of collecting the offerings and gifts for the temple. Nehemiah is a brave man. He does not waste any time. He kicks evil out of the temple as soon as he gets back home.

Nehemiah puts good men in charge of the temple. But Eliashib does not lose his job. He continues to be the high priest. He cannot lose his job. He is from the line of Aaron. So, that means he is high priest for life, even if he is an awful man. The good news is that Nehemiah gives some of Eliashib's tasks to good and loyal men. So, that puts a stop to much of the evil work that Eliashib does in the temple.



**The singers, gatekeepers, and other temple workers go back to work in their fields.**

## OFFERINGS AND GIFTS FOR THE TEMPLE (Numbers 18:21–24)

Nehemiah changes many things in the temple. He makes worship in the temple better. The people stopped paying tithe. Tithe is 10% of all the money you earn. So, Nehemiah encourages the people to start paying tithes and offerings again.

**Read about tithes and offerings in Numbers 18:21–24; Malachi 3:10; Matthew 23:23; 1 Corinthians 9:7–14; 2 Corinthians 9:6–8; and Hebrews 7:1, 2. What do these verses teach us about why we should pay tithes and offerings?**

As we saw, the people stopped paying tithe. With no tithes and offerings, the temple is in trouble. Many workers leave the temple. They look for other jobs so they can feed their families. So, people stop coming to the temple to worship God.

“God gave His people a plan for tithes and offerings. It is a beautiful plan. It shows that God is fair. Both rich and poor people have a part to do. God asks all of us to give back to Him 10% of everything we earn.

“We read about God’s plan for tithe in Malachi 3:10. Do you see that God does not ask us to pay tithe because we feel like giving or being unselfish? Yes, those reasons are good reasons for giving. But they are not the reasons we pay God tithe. We pay tithe because God orders us to pay it. The tithe belongs to God. He asks that we give it back to Him.”—*Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, 2nd edition (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 2005), page 304, adapted.

What will happen if our church stops paying tithe? The same thing that happened to the Israelite temple. Our church will suffer. We all need to support God’s church. Then we can pay the people who do God’s work. And we can enjoy worshiping God in our churches too. If we do not pay tithe, then our worldwide church will have trouble sharing the Good News about Jesus with other people. So, it is very important to pay our tithes and offerings.

We also pay tithes because it is part of God’s plan for us. We can read about this plan in the Bible. God expects us to trust His wisdom. He is in control. So, we can trust Him when we put our tithes in His hands.

**Why is paying tithe important for our spirit?**



**“The tithe belongs to God. He asks that we give it back to Him.”**

**BREAKING THE SABBATH (Nehemiah 13:15, 16)**

**Read Nehemiah 13:15, 16. As these verses show us, what problem does Nehemiah want to solve?**

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It is not easy to stand up for God when most people do not stand with you. But Nehemiah has courage. He wants to take a stand for the Sabbath. God tells us that the Sabbath is a holy day. No work should be done on the Sabbath. So, Nehemiah wants to make sure the people in Jerusalem obey God's command.

Yes, the Sabbath is a special day. It helps us remember that God made us. God wants us to spend this time with Him. The Sabbath also is a time when God makes our lives new. But that only happens when we spend that holy time with Him.

The Sabbath is a powerful day. It helps keep our faith alive when we honor it. The Sabbath is God's gift to us. It blesses us with rest and peace.

**Read Nehemiah 13:17–22. As these verses show us, what does Nehemiah do to stop people from buying and selling on the Sabbath?**

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**God wants us to spend the Sabbath with Him. It is a time when God makes our lives new.**

As governor of Judah, Nehemiah must help the people follow the rules. Judah's rules are made from God's law. So, Nehemiah must protect the law, including the Sabbath commandment. When Nehemiah left Jerusalem, the leaders let Eliashib and Tobiah do whatever they wanted. Maybe the leaders were mad at Nehemiah for what happened in the past. You will remember that Nehemiah made the leaders pay back money to the poor.

The first thing Nehemiah does is scold the leaders. Then he commands the people to shut the city gates. He posts men at the gates to guard them. What happens next? The people move the marketplace from inside the city to outside it to get around Nehemiah's law! Nehemiah takes action. He tells the sellers that they will be beaten if they try to sell things outside the city the next Sabbath. The sellers see that Nehemiah is not afraid to punish them. So, they stop coming back to the city after that.

**WHAT DID YOUR FATHERS DO? (Nehemiah 13:18)**

Nehemiah loves God's Sabbath. We like him for his deep love. We saw yesterday how much Nehemiah loves God's Sabbath. He promises to punish the sellers from other countries if they will not stop selling their stuff on the Sabbath. As a governor, Nehemiah's job is to make sure that the people obey this law.

Nehemiah is not afraid to tell the leaders what they do wrong either. They do not do their duty. " 'You are doing a very bad thing. You are ruining [breaking] the Sabbath day. You know that your ancestors [family members from long ago] did the same things. That is why our God brought all the troubles and disaster [bad happening] to us and to this city. Now you people are making it so that more of these bad things will happen to Israel. They are doing this because you are breaking the Sabbath by treating [thinking about] it just as if it were any other day' " (Nehemiah 13:17, 18, ERV).

Then Nehemiah says, "So this is what I did: Every Friday evening, just before dark, I commanded the gatekeepers to shut and lock the gates to Jerusalem. They were not to be opened until the Sabbath day was over. I put some of my own men at the gates. They were commanded to make sure that no load was brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day" (Nehemiah 13:19, ERV).

Nehemiah warns the people not to break the Sabbath. His words help them to see what they do wrong. Then the Jews become very strict about keeping the Sabbath after that. By Jesus' time, the Jews are too strict. Jesus often does not agree with the religious leaders about how to keep the Sabbath.

**Read Matthew 12:1–8; Mark 3:1–6; Luke 6:6–11; and John 5:5–16. What happens in these verses? How does the Jews' experience with the Sabbath in Nehemiah's day help explain why the problem happens?**

The religious leaders accuse Jesus of breaking the law. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5). How can the One who made the Sabbath be guilty of breaking it? Talk about taking a good thing too far! Yes, the leaders are right to honor the Sabbath. But they are too strict. Yes, the law is important. But the leaders do not remember that being fair, showing mercy, and having faith are more important than their man-made rules (Matthew 23:23).

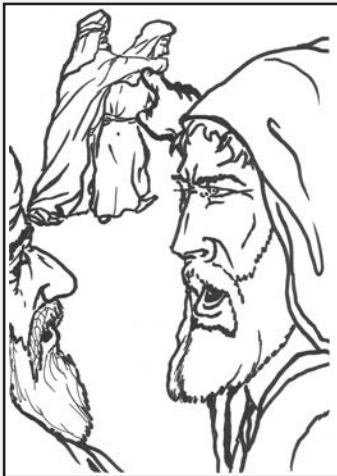


**The religious leaders accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath.**

**ADDITIONAL THOUGHT:** Ellen G. White, “Rejoicing in the Lord,” pages 115–126, in *Steps to Christ*.

“Nehemiah explains God’s command. God does not want His people to marry anyone who worships false gods. Nehemiah shows God’s people the awful things that will happen to them if they break this very law. These same things happened to their people in the past. The Jews wake up. They see their sin. They start to change. They start to do the work that will turn away God’s anger. The change brings God’s blessing and favor.

“Some religious leaders have wives who worship false gods. These religious leaders announce that they cannot let go of their wives. They cannot be separated from them. But Nehemiah does not show them pity. He does not care if they are important leaders. If they refuse to give up their wives, they cannot serve God in the temple. One example is the grandson of the top religious leader. This grandson married a daughter of Sanballat. Sanballat is an evil man. When the grandson refuses to give up his wife, Nehemiah removes this man from office. Then he makes him leave Israel forever! Nehemiah prays, ‘My God, punish these people. They made the priesthood [the religious leaders] unclean [full of sin]. They treated [their actions showed what they felt about the law] it as if it was not important. They did not obey the agreement that you made with the priests and Levites.’ [Nehemiah 13:29, ERV].”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pages 673, 674, adapted.



**“When the grandson refuses to give up his wife, Nehemiah removes this man from office. Then [Nehemiah] makes him leave Israel forever!”**

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Read in class the Ellen G. White statement above. What do you think about Nehemiah’s actions? Do you think Nehemiah was too strong? Or do you feel it was right for him to separate holy men from the wives that they loved? Give reasons for your answer. Why must our church leaders show love and understanding when they punish church members for their sins?
- ② In Nehemiah’s day, the people start doing wrong. Little by little, they fall deeper into sin. Why must we be careful not to do the same thing? How can we protect ourselves against this danger?