

Pine Knoll Sabbath School Study Notes

Fourth Quarter 2019: *Ezra and Nehemiah*

Lesson 11 “Backslidden People”

Read for this week’s study

Nehemiah 13:1–9; Deuteronomy 23:3–6; Nehemiah 13:10–14; Numbers 18:21–24; Nehemiah 13:15–22; John 5:5–16.

Memory Text

“And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!” (Nehemiah 13:22, NKJV).

Lesson Outline from Adult Sabbath School Study Guide

- I. Introduction
- II. Tainted Temple Leadership
- III. The Levites in the Fields
- IV. Tithes and Offerings
- V. Treading the Wine Presses on Sabbath
- VI. Did Not Your Fathers Do Thus?
- VII. Further Study

Questions and Notes for Consideration

Facilitator: Daniel Duda

1. What happens after a big celebration? Because the enemy never quits, the work of a spiritual leader is never finished. After his absence from the city, Nehemiah discovered that the Jews gradually began to neglect keeping the covenant they had made with God (10:28-39). These lessons examine the problem of backsliding and show how Nehemiah addressed three areas of concern: Stewardship (10-14), Sabbath (15-22), and separation from pagan wives (23-29), which will be considered with the next lesson.
2. “Why do God’s people all through sacred history—whether the Jews in ancient Israel, or the Christians who followed them during and after New Testament times—so easily allow themselves to be led astray?” (Sunday’s lesson) Can we avoid their mistakes? Many people tend to create and operate within unhealthy circles of intrigue and alliances (v. 7-9). How do you as a growing, trusting Christian, recognize those pitfalls and take steps to approach life and responsibilities in a healing, humble, and wise way?

3. The spirit of joyful celebration (chapter 12) rapidly vanished. Tithes and offerings were the Levite's only source of income. When the people withheld provisions for the Levites (Tuesday's lesson), the Levites found other lines of work. What, if any, are the implications for us, living in 21st century?
4. What is the purpose of stewardship and how is it related to our own spirituality?
5. Sabbath observance is discussed in Wednesday's lesson, particularly related to commercial activity. We've seen this concern before in 10:31-32 (and in the pre-exilic era as seen in Amos 8:5 and Jeremiah 17:19-27). Was Sabbath kept differently in the rural areas versus in Jerusalem? Is there danger when a ruler enforces something he believes he has based on the law of God? Is it possible to take it too far? How did Nehemiah do?
6. When Jesus came, some people kept the Sabbath strictly (Matthew 12:1-8; Luke 6:6-11; John 5:5-16), even carefully paying tithe from mint, dill and cumin (Matthew 23:23), but that did not make them loving, kind and gracious! Jesus shows this rigid formality is not the purpose of religion, but the "weightier matters" of "justice, mercy and faith" are the goal. Why is Jesus more concerned with relational matters and the community impact of religion than with just "keeping the rules"?
7. How can we, both as individuals and as a church, avoid similar mistakes, not just about Sabbath but in any areas we believe are important to our faith?
8. Did Nehemiah and Jesus relate to backslidden people differently (John 8:1-11)? How can we receive the greatest benefit from a historical book like Nehemiah (or Ezra)? Why is understanding the storyline so important?
9. How does understanding God's gracious character and his way of dealing with evil in the cosmic conflict help us from misapplying some truth, just because someone else sincerely applied it in a certain way during the "sacred" history?
10. What was so shocking about the parable of two lost sons for Jesus' contemporaries (Luke 15:11-32)? Can we learn something from the way God relates to backslidden people?

Thoughts from Graham Maxwell

How did you interpret that, what to do with the tithe, and has it made any difference, not to the way you live, but the way you regard God? Remember the words there? Verse 22:

You shall tithe all the yield of your seed [and so on. And verse 23]. And before the LORD your God, in the place which he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain [and so on. Then verse 24], If the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to bring the tithe, when the LORD your God blesses you, because the

place is too far from you, which the LORD your God chooses, to set his name there, then you shall turn it into money, and bind up the money in your hand, and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses, and spend the money for whatever you desire, oxen, or sheep, or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves; and you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household.

Have you been doing this? You're not doing very well tonight. You don't have the phylacteries on, and you're not doing this either, all out of one book. We don't stone our children when they are gluttonous, nor banish illegitimate children from our church, do we? And we let women speak in church, and a whole lot of other things. Are we being disobedient, or are we interpreting the scriptures correctly? By the way, the *S.D.A. Bible Commentary* on Deuteronomy is also very good I think, for many of the details we don't have time to discuss. I hope you have a copy available. I think Deuteronomy was handled very well, and I think this passage is. Now God wanted them to take this tithe and attend these religious services together. Was this the first tithe, or the second tithe? This is the second tithe, isn't it?—the one that was used for attendance at religious convocations. They shared this with each other and with the Levites, but he says, "If it's too far to go, turn it into money and buy anything you like, but at least let's keep in touch; rejoice before me." {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, *The Picture of God in All 66 – Deuteronomy*, recorded November, 1982, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*

*Audio links to the West Covina series recorded in 1983:

<http://pkp.cc/9MMPOGIA66> (Part 1) <http://pkp.cc/10MMPOGIA66> (Part 2)

Would it mean we'd rather die than break the Sabbath? So would the Jews who killed Christ. And they paid tithe, and they strained out gnats from their goats' milk. You remember all those things they did. And there were no idols in the land. And how they read their Bibles! But they read them in the wrong way. And they were not his friends. And Jesus told them, "Some of you will arise in the wrong resurrection, expecting to be saved because you are the children of Abraham, and have kept the Sabbath, and paid tithe, and practiced health reform. And I will say, 'Go away. I never knew you. That is, we never were friends.'"

So do you feel friendly toward God when you keep Sabbath? Pay tithe? Practice health reform? If not, something's seriously wrong. Is it possible to be as obedient as a good Adventist—if he's going to be an Adventist in good and regular standing he obeys a lot of rules, doesn't he? Is it possible to be that obedient, and feel free and feel friendly toward God and toward each other? That's what I see running through scripture. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series,

The Picture of God in All 66 – Ezra and Nehemiah, recorded December, 1981, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*

*Audio links to the West Covina series recorded in 1984:

<http://pkp.cc/23MMPOGIA66> (Part 1) <http://pkp.cc/24MMPOGIA66> (Part 2)

Yet Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for us (Mark 2:27). It was not to be a mere test of obedience, but rather to be a help. I believe that the great purpose of the Sabbath is to remind us of the truth that is the basis of our faith; the very truth that does set us free. In the first place, the Bible tells us in Exodus 20 and Exodus 31, that the Sabbath is designed to serve as a reminder that God created us; that we are his creatures. But to be more specific according to Colossians 1:16, the one who created us was none other than Christ himself. The seventh day Sabbath reminds us that the one who came to save us is also the one who made us in the beginning. The gentle Jesus who died on Calvary is also the supreme, all powerful creator of the universe. God did not send some subordinate person to die for us. The Creator came himself one who is equal with God, for he is God. By keeping holy the seventh day Sabbath, we acknowledge our faith in Jesus as not only our Savior, but also our Creator and our God.

A second way in which the seventh day Sabbath serves to strengthen faith is mentioned in Exodus 31:13 and Exodus 20:12, 20. There we're told the Sabbath is designed to remind us that God is the one who sanctifies us. Our sanctification includes not just forgiveness, but the healing of the damage sin has done. It means the harmonious development of our physical, mental and spiritual powers, until the image of God, in which we were originally created, is perfectly restored. The observance of the seventh day Sabbath is an acknowledgement that only the Creator can perform such a marvelous work of healing and transformation. Just as he created us in the beginning, so he has the power to re-create us now. Surely it is no less a miracle of creation to restore fallen human beings than it was to create them perfect in the beginning. No wonder David prayed as he did after his sad experience with Bathsheba, "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Psalm 51:10).

Now some seek to accomplish this transformation by themselves by rigorous obedience, self-discipline and self-denial. The Sabbath comes each week to remind us that only by faith in our Creator can the healing work be done. It's strange that Sabbath keeping should be thought to be a legalistic act; a denial of true faith. Actually, Sabbath-keeping done in the right spirit is a denial of legalism, a denial that we can save ourselves. It's an acknowledgment that only by faith in the one who created us in the beginning can we possibly be healed and re-created now. And what a perversion it is to suggest that seventh day Sabbath keeping is legalism; except that we can turn it around that way—and it has been done.

A third way in which the Sabbath serves to remind us of the truth and strengthen our faith in God is mentioned in Hebrews chapter 4. There the Sabbath is described as a type and a foretaste of the final rest and restoration to come. Just as God rested from his labors at the end of creation week so there remains a Sabbath-like rest; the Greek says a *'sabbatismos'*. You can almost hear the meaning of the word. "There remains there a Sabbath-like rest for the people of God. When the children of Israel marched into the land of Canaan, they failed to enter into God's rest," the apostle says, "because of lack of faith. They possessed the Promised Land but they did not enjoy the Sabbath-like rest that faith brings." Just remember the book of Judges. Would you call that the Sabbath-like rest? That is not God's intention. "But those who maintain their faith in Christ may begin to enjoy this rest even in this life and they will enter into it fully when they are admitted to the heavenly Canaan and Eden is restored." So by keeping holy the seventh day Sabbath, we acknowledge our anticipation of this Sabbath-like rest to come. We acknowledge our faith in the second coming of Christ and the re-creation of all things.

There are more of course, but these three focuses or purposes of the Sabbath answer the three great questions that have stood in the minds of thinking people—the three great quests of philosophy. Where have we come from? Why are we here? And where do we go after we die?

But mankind has paid a heavy price for neglecting the Sabbath, or substituting another day. For without the Sabbath to provide the answers to the three great questions of life, other solutions have been substituted. Where have we come from? Without the seventh day Sabbath to remind us that in the beginning Christ created us, room has been left for the substitution of the theory of the evolutionary origin of the human race. Or as others say more scientifically, we don't know where we've come from.

Why are we here? How do we attain to the greatest good in life? Without the seventh day Sabbath to remind us that righteousness and salvation come by faith in Jesus Christ, room has been left for the substitution of the fundamental error of righteousness by works. Or as others have said more carelessly, we don't know why we're here. So let's eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die!

And where do we go after we die? Without the seventh day Sabbath to point forward to the second coming, to the rewards of faith and the results of sin, room has been left for the substitution of the belief in the natural immortality of the soul. Or as others prefer to say, we don't know where we go after we die. So again, let's eat, drink and be merry.

Incidentally, those three substitute answers; aren't they almost universally held? And not just in Christianity. Belief in the natural immortality of the soul is shared by almost everybody. The idea that salvation comes by works; Ellen White states that is the fundamental error of every false religious system, salvation by works. There are all kinds of substitute explanations as to where we came from that put God in a bad light, or that make of no effect the plan of salvation.

But all three of these substitutions wipe out all the significance of the plan of salvation. This is why the seventh day Sabbath is so vital a part of God's last message to the world. The main difference between the many religions in the world and true Christianity lies in the answers to these three great quests.

We also speak of the seventh day Sabbath as being the seal of God and we all want to be sealed at the end. In what sense do you understand the seventh day Sabbath to be the seal of God? In what sense could it be? Would it be possible to be observing the seventh day Sabbath at the end and be on the wrong side in the great controversy? It's happened before. Is the mere refraining from work from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown evidence that one has the seal of God?

If to be "sealed" means to be so settled into the truth about God, both intellectually and spiritually, that one cannot be moved, then obviously there have been many people who appeared to observe the seventh day Sabbath who were not settled into the truth. In fact they had accepted the lie. The men who crucified Christ didn't work from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. Would you say they had the seal of God? So in what sense could the seventh day Sabbath be the seal, do you think? The Sabbath really does sum up this truth about God. It answers the questions about life, and the questions about God; they go right together in a package, don't they? {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, Faith, Righteousness and Salvation, #13 "Faith and the Seventh-day Sabbath", recorded April, 1975, Lynwood, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*
<http://pkp.cc/13MMFRS> (Part 1) <http://pkp.cc/14MMFRS> (Part 2)

Lou: You spoke of the charge that God is arbitrary, harsh, severe, and so forth. The question has come in, "If you're talking about arbitrary, isn't something like the fourth commandment—if you take the Ten Commandments, you can kind of understand most of them, but when you come to the fourth and here's the seventh day. There it is. Isn't that arbitrary?"

Graham: Well, it is often so described and therefore it makes a beautiful test of our obedience?

Lou: Just obey because God said it.

Graham: Remember our bumper sticker from last week: "God has said it; I believe it; that's all there is to it."

Then the Sabbath won't be much of a blessing. And Jesus said, "I gave it to you as a gift; you weren't made for the Sabbath." The only remedy for that is to go back to Genesis and read all sixty-six. That's the remedy for every question, in my book. And if you start in the beginning of Genesis you find all the meanings of the Sabbath. The Sabbath reminds us of all that was revealed about God during creation week, the message of freedom and his sharing his creative power with us. And then it was given to remind us of the Exodus. Again it's a monument to

freedom. It came after crucifixion week. The Sabbath reminds us of all the answers given Crucifixion Friday. And then Hebrews says the Sabbath is a type of the rest to come. I don't know of any commandment that has more reasons. Therefore I will not call it arbitrary. It is the most meaningful and significant one. But it comes from "here a little and there a little," you see. When we take the Bible as a whole, God has never asked us to do anything arbitrary. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, Conversations About God, #7 with Lou Venden, "The Question of Authority" recorded February, 1984, Loma Linda, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct link:*
<http://pkp.cc/7MMCAG>

You notice that the Sabbath is not about us. It is about God. I like to think that is why we put it in our name: Seventh-day Adventists. We didn't put it in there to say something good about us, but to say that we have taken a position about our God. I believe a real Seventh-day Adventist is a Christian who accepts and believes all that the Sabbath has to say about our God. I wish it always meant that. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, Conversations About God, #10, "The Reminder of the Evidence" recorded March, 1984, Loma Linda, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct link:*
<http://pkp.cc/10MMCAG>

Lou: We've had several other questions that have come in, so we must press on. Someone has asked: "Why did Jesus heal the paralytic on the Sabbath?"

Graham: Many of his healings were elective, weren't they? The paralytic had been there thirty-eight years.

Lou: Not a critical emergency.

Graham: Not at all. You see, I think Jesus tried to keep a low profile most of the time. He knew if he became very public, he was so controversial, he wouldn't last very long. And indeed he didn't when he became very conspicuous. But when it came to the Sabbath, he risked his life repeatedly to clear the Sabbath of misunderstanding. Because an arbitrary approach to the Sabbath puts the Father in the worst possible light; and so, to clear this up, he ran the risk of doing healing, and helping things on the Sabbath. And he ran into trouble every time. It evidently is that important to redeem the Sabbath of arbitrariness, because the Sabbath speaks so eloquently of God, for good or ill. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, Conversations About God, #13 with Lou Venden, "How God Treats His Erring Children" recorded April, 1984, Loma Linda, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct link:* <http://pkp.cc/13MMCAG>

Further Study with Ellen White

In the visible creation, divine wisdom is manifested in an endless variety of processes. Uniformity is not the rule that is followed in the kingdom of nature. Neither is it the rule that is followed in the kingdom of grace. In different ways God works to attain one purpose—the saving of souls. By different methods the gracious Redeemer deals with different minds. The change of heart is as truly wrought out by one process as by another. It is the Lord working upon minds and molding characters. {TDG 67.2}

Whatever necessity there is for our agency in the advancement of the cause of God, He has purposely arranged for our good. He has honored us by making us co-workers with Him. He has ordained that there should be a necessity for the co-operation of men, that they may keep in exercise their benevolence. {3T 390.2}

The character of God as revealed by Christ invites our faith and love, for we have a Father whose mercy and compassion fail not. At every step of our journey heavenward He will be with us to guide in every perplexity, to give us help in every temptation. {HP 16.4}

The blessing of God is a healing power, and those who are abundant in benefiting others will realize that wondrous blessing in both heart and life. {CH 28.2}

God is not dependent upon men for the advancement of His cause. He might have made angels the ambassadors of His truth. He might have made known His will, as He proclaimed the law from Sinai with His own voice. But in order to cultivate a spirit of benevolence in us, He has chosen to employ men to do this work. {CS 20.1}

Every good thing of earth was placed here by the bountiful hand of God as an expression of His love to man. The poor are His, and the cause of religion is His. The gold and the silver are the Lord's, and He could rain them from heaven if He chose. But instead of this He has made man His steward, entrusting him with means, not to be hoarded, but to be used in benefiting others. He thus makes man the medium through which to distribute His blessings on earth. God planned the system of beneficence in order that man might become like his Creator, benevolent and unselfish in character, and finally be a partaker with Christ of the eternal, glorious reward. {9T 255.2}

Wherever there is life, there is increase and growth; in God's kingdom there is a constant interchange—taking in, and giving out; receiving, and returning to the Lord His own. God works with every true believer, and the light and blessings received are given out again in the work which the believer does. Thus the capacity for receiving is increased. As one imparts of the heavenly gifts, he makes room for fresh currents of grace and truth to flow into the soul from the living fountain. Greater light, increased knowledge and blessing, are his. {6T 448.2}

God might have committed the message of the gospel, and all the work of loving ministry, to the heavenly angels. He might have employed other means for accomplishing His purpose. But in His infinite love He chose to make us co-workers with Himself, with Christ and the angels, that we might share the blessing, the joy, the spiritual uplifting, which results from this unselfish ministry. {SC 79.2}

Wherever there is an impulse of love and sympathy, wherever the heart reaches out to bless and uplift others, there is revealed the working of God's Holy Spirit. In the depths of heathenism, men who have had no knowledge of the written law of God, who have never even heard the name of Christ, have been kind to His servants, protecting them at the risk of their own lives. Their acts show the working of a divine power. The Holy Spirit has implanted the grace of Christ in the heart of the savage, quickening his sympathies contrary to his nature, contrary to his education. The "Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9), is shining in his soul; and this light, if heeded, will guide his feet to the kingdom of God. {COL 385.1}

The glory of heaven is in lifting up the fallen, comforting the distressed. And wherever Christ abides in human hearts, He will be revealed in the same way. Wherever it acts, the religion of Christ will bless. Wherever it works, there is brightness. {COL 386.1}

Christ brings all true believers into complete oneness with Himself, even the oneness which exists between Him and His Father. The true children of God are bound up with one another and with their Saviour. They are one with Christ in God. {SD 293.5}

To love as Christ loved means to manifest unselfishness at all times and in all places, by kind words and pleasant looks. These cost those who give them nothing, but they leave behind a fragrance that surrounds the soul. Their effect can never be estimated. Not only are they a blessing to the receiver, but to the giver; for they react upon him. Genuine love is a precious attribute of heavenly origin, which increases in fragrance in proportion as it is dispensed to others. . . . {5BC 1140.4}

Christ's love is deep and earnest, flowing like an irrepressible stream to all who will accept it. There is no selfishness in His love. If this heaven-born love is an abiding principle in the heart, it will make itself known, not only to those we hold most dear in sacred relationship, but to all with whom we come in contact. It will lead us to bestow little acts of attention, to make concessions, to perform deeds of kindness, to speak tender, true, encouraging words. It will lead us to sympathize with those whose hearts hunger for sympathy (MS 17, 1899). {5BC 1140.5}

True sanctification unites believers to Christ and to one another in the bonds of tender sympathy. This union causes to flow continually into the heart rich currents of Christlike love, which flows forth again in love for one another. {5BC 1141.2}

Man needs a power outside of and beyond himself, to restore him to the likeness of God, and enable him to do the work of God; but this does not make the human agency unessential. Humanity lays hold upon divine power, Christ dwells in the heart by faith; and through co-operation with the divine, the power of man becomes efficient for good. {DA 296.4}

He who called the fisherman of Galilee is still calling men to His service. And He is just as willing to manifest His power through us as through the first disciples. However imperfect and sinful we may be, the Lord holds out to us the offer of partnership with Himself, of apprenticeship to Christ. He invites us to come under the divine instruction, that, uniting with Christ, we may work the works of God. {DA 297.1}

When the heavenly principle of eternal love fills the heart, it will flow out to others, not merely because favors are received of them, but because love is the principle of action, and modifies the character, governs the impulses, controls the passions, subdues enmity, and elevates the affections. This love is not contracted, so as merely to include "me and mine," but is as broad as the world and as high as heaven. It is in harmony with that of the angel workers. This love, cherished in the soul, sweetens the entire life, and sheds a refining influence on all around. Possessing it, we cannot but be happy, let fortune smile or frown. And if we love God with all the heart, we must love His children also. This love is the spirit of God. It is the heavenly adorning that gives true nobility and dignity to the soul. {OHC 175.2}

Our heavenly Father desires through the observance of the Sabbath to preserve among men a knowledge of Himself. He desires that the Sabbath shall direct our minds to Him as the true and living God, and that through knowing Him we may have life and peace. {6T 349.1}