

## “Why Is The House of God Forsaken?”

*“So I contended with the rulers and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken...’”* (Neh. 13: 11).

Nehemiah, the concerned, conscientious Jew, who posed the above question had been “cupbearer” to Artaxerxes, a Persian king (Neh. 1:11-2:1). Though he had a very comfortable position as the “King’s cupbearer,” he was nonetheless very concerned about the plight of the Jewish people. Hence, he inquired of Hanani (whom he referred to as “one of my brethren”) “concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem,” Neh. 1:2. And the answer given was very disconcerting. He was told that “The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are burned with fire,” Neh. 1:3.

In Nehemiah’s own words, upon receipt of that report, he said “when I heard these words...I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven,” Neh. 1:4. Then he confessed “the sins of the children of Israel,” and his own sins, humbly acknowledged that “we have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses,” Neh. 1:7. And he even acknowledged that God, through Moses, had warned the Jews that “if you are unfaithful. I will **scatter** you among the nations,” Neh. 1:8; cf. Lev. 26:33. Sadly and tragically, the Jews did not heed God’s warning; they had been “unfaithful,” and by the time Nehemiah appears on the scene they had indeed been scattered “among the nations.” They learned (the hard way!) that it doesn’t pay to disregard the warnings of God!

With regard to Israel’s unfaithfulness, we now give a brief background. After the Jews (through the leadership of Joshua who succeeded Moses) had entered Canaan (the promised land), and after the death of Joshua, the Jewish nation plunged headlong into sin! They “*did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals; and they forsook the Lord God of their fathers...and followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger, They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtoreths*” (Judges 2:11-13). Not surprisingly, “the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies,” Judges 2:14. This inevitably caused Israel to become “greatly distressed,” at which times they would cry out to God for deliverance, so God “*raised up Judges*” to deliver them out of the hands of their enemies, Judges 2:15-16. But each time the God-appointed judge died, they “*reverted and behaved more corruptly,*” and “*did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way,*” Judges 2:19. We now spring forward to the time of Samuel, who was both a prophet and a judge. After Samuel became old, the Jews went to him and demanded, saying, “*Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations,*” I Sam. 8:5. Samuel was greatly “displeased,” but God told him to “*heed the voice of the people,*” stating also that “*they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them,*” I Sam. 8:6-7.

This now brings us to the United kingdom. Saul, David, and Solomon (in that order) reigned 40 years each. Following the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam “*reigned in his place,*” I Kings 11:43. During his reign, the united kingdom divided with ten tribes following Jeroboam (which constituted the northern kingdom) and two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) following Rehoboam (which constituted the Southern Kingdom).

Time passed and the northern kingdom (Israel) was taken away into Assyrian Captivity (2 Kings 17), and the southern kingdom (a little over 100 years later) being taken into Babylonian Captivity (2 Kings 25; 2 Chron. 36; Jeremiah 52).

By the time of Nehemiah, Babylon had fallen, the Medo-Persian Empire was in power, and a remnant of the Jews had returned to rebuild the temple, restore the worship and service of God as outlined in the Law of Moses. The work had begun, but the people became greatly discouraged due to much hostility from opposing forces. This brings us to the time of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was a man of prayer; he was a natural leader, and he was a man of action. He did not just mourn the plight of the Jews; he went to work doing something about the situation. He obtained a leave of absence from his role as “*Cupbearer*” to the King, he went to Jerusalem, surveyed the situation, and rallied the people into action (Nehemiah 2). Amazingly, the wall was rebuilt in 52 days (Neh. 6:15)! The Jewish people were then urged to follow the law more closely (Neh. 8), the people confessed their sins (Neh. 9), and they even said “*we will not neglect the house of our God,*” Neh. 10:39.

After a 12-year leave of absence from his role as “*cupbearer*” to the king (Neh. 2:1; 13:6), Nehemiah “*returned to the king.*” Then after a relatively short time he returned to Jerusalem and was shocked at what he saw. The people had already “*forsaken*” the “*house of God,*” so Nehemiah “*contended with the rulers, and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken’*” (Neh. 13:11)?

A study of Nehemiah 13 reveals the answer as to “*why*” the “*house of God*” was forsaken. “*The house of God*” in Nehemiah’s day was “*forsaken*” **because:**

**1. The people did not respect the boundaries of fellowship.** Eliashib the priest was “*allied with Tobiah,*” Neh. 13:4. Tobiah was an “*Ammonite,*” Neh. 2:10; he was of the people whom God had said “*shall not enter the assembly of the Lord,*” Deut. 23:3, and he, from the very beginning had tried to thwart the work of Nehemiah and the people. But when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he discovered that Eliashib the priest had “*prepared*” for Tobiah a “*large room*” in the “*courts of the house of God*” (13:5,7)!

**2. They compromised with the enemy** — evidenced by their catering to the likes of Tobiah, who could be called “public enemy number one.”

**3. They perverted God’s Organization.** God’s plan was that the priests should be provided for through the tithes of the people. But when Nehemiah returned back to Jerusalem, the Levites had “*gone back*” to the field because “*the portions had not been given*” to them,” Neh. 13:10.

**4. They perverted the worship of God.** God had commanded the Jews to “*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy*” (Ex. 20:8), but when Nehemiah returned to the scene the people were buying, selling, and working on the sabbath! (13:15-17).

**5. They perverted the purpose of God.** God intended for His people to be a distinct people, separate from the nations around them, but when Nehemiah returned he discovered that they had “*married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab*” people whom God had specifically said “*make no covenant*” with, and not to marry (Deut. 7:1-3). But they disregarded God’s plain instructions!

### **Why Is The House of God Forsaken?**

*“The house of God”* in this the gospel age is *“the church”* (I Tim. 3:15), which Jesus built (Matt. 16:18), and purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). It, too, has been *“forsaken”* time and again. And, in principle, in the same ways as during Nehemiah’s day.

**1. Many do not respect the boundaries of fellowship.** We must *“have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness,”* Eph. 5:11, and we must not bid *“god speed”* to those who pervert the gospel (2 John 9-11), but it is happening all the time, with entirely too many being more concerned with *“unity in diversity”* than *“the unity of the Spirit!”*

**2. Compromising with the enemy.** Some “churches of Christ” now hold joint sunrise Easter services with denominational bodies, and compromise with them in other ways as well.

**3. Perverting God’s organization** — evidenced by sponsoring church arrangements and church-support of human institutions.

**4. Perverting the worship of the church** — evidenced, in part, by some churches having their “traditional worship,” followed by “contemporary worship.”

**5. Perverting the purpose of the church.** The church is *“the pillar and ground of the truth,”* I Tim. 3:15. Its God—assigned work is evangelism, benevolence to indigent saints, and the edification of the saints (Eph. 4:11-2; 1 Thess. 1:7-8; 2 Cor. 8,9, etc. But many churches are so caught up in the social gospel of men that they give but little emphasis to the **saving** gospel of Jesus Christ!

**Conclusion:** It is amazing how history keeps repeating itself. It seems that every major apostasy among brethren, either in part or in whole, (in principle) follows the same pattern as characterized apostate Israel. Let it never be said of any of us that **we** were participants or contributors to *“the house of God”* being forsaken!

—Bobby. Witherington

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