

Title: There They Go Again
Date: November 26, 2023
Subject: Reoccurring sin has to be dealt with.
Scripture: Nehemiah 13

“There they go again” is a zinger politicians aim at opponents. The originator was Ronald Reagan in a 1980 debate. When President Carter criticized Reagan's position, Reagan said “There you go again” to try to disarm Carter’s comments and make it seem like Carter was the one with a problem.

Neither phrase is in our text but it sure could have been going through Nehemiah’s mind.

Read Nehemiah 13:1 - 9

Nehemiah had been recalled by the king to Babylon and was gone for an unknown period before he returned for a second stint as governor. His absence may have been as brief as a year, which makes what happened even more troublesome. The people in and around Jerusalem had promised, covenanted, bound themselves with the curse and an oath to “follow the law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord” (10:29). They had specified three areas – caring for the house of God, observing the Sabbath and upholding God’s ideal for marriage.

Their commitment didn’t last. The people reverted to their old ways. They again neglected the House of God, profaned the Sabbath and failed to uphold God's marriage standard.

It seems shortly after Nehemiah returned there was a day when the book of Moses was read. The people had gathered for a special feast, an ordinary time of worship or a “welcome back governor” ceremony.

It just so happened the scripture reading contained the story of the Israelites journey to the promised land. It recounted how the Ammonites and Moabites failed to treat the Israelites kindly. They didn’t give Israel food or water though they said they’d pay. Moab was aided by the prophet Balaam though he only pronounced a blessing on Israel as that's all God allowed him to do. However, he deviously counseled the Moabites to use their women to seduce the Israelite men and turn them away from the Lord. For these actions they were banned from the assembly of the Lord and weren’t to be extended a treaty of friendship (Deuteronomy 23:3 - 6).

The people and the priest both contributed to the problem. Whether it was a case of leader following the example of the people or people playing follow the leader, it's doesn't make much difference as they all were involved in doing wrong and violating God’s Word.

Eliashib the priest wasn’t operating under the principle of keeping your friends close and your enemies closer when he become pals, real buds with Nehemiah's arch enemy Tobiah. I guess Eliashib felt bygones should be bygones, let old times be forgotten, water under the bridge. Whatever. He enabled Tobiah to live in a temple storeroom. Out went the temple supplies. In came Tobiah to a place where he could exert influence.

Why didn't anyone point out that Tobiah had tried to prevent the Jews from building the walls, had mocked their effort, paid an infiltrator to undermine Nehemiah and planned an armed attack on the city?

Another aspect of the neglect of God's house was the Levites and singers who served in the temple weren't being adequately supported. They were forced to go back to work in their fields so they wouldn't starve.

On the day the people heard about God's directives about who wasn't allowed to worship at the temple, they were awakened. They took immediate action which seems to coincide with Nehemiah's. The people moved to exclude those of foreign descent, who hadn't converted to Judaism or weren't seriously seeking God.

Nehemiah was greatly displeased and upset. He threw out of the temple all of Tobiah's belongings – clothes, furniture, décor. There was no room in the inn or temple for Tobiah. Nehemiah ordered the priests to purify and consecrate the storerooms for God's purposes again. When Nehemiah cleaned house, he didn't leave it empty. He filled the rooms with the provisions necessary for the temple. He also appointed new managers who were trustworthy and would be responsible.

As Christians and as a church body, it doesn't make spiritual sense to cozy up with the enemy and sin. We need to throw out things that aren't of God. False teaching and those who spout it – gone. Living like the world system opposed to God – gone. Stuff of the old life – gone like yesterday's news.

Repentance is more than just a change of thinking and confessing our sin. It includes a change of action, of doing what's right. Out with the old. In with the new. We need to wash ourselves in the word of God, ask God to cleanse us from our sin. We need to bring in the elements and practices of the new life. We can't just remove sin and leave a void. The negative action must have a corresponding positive. We need to put ourselves under the authority and teaching of God's word as we read, study and hear it taught.

The story is told of a letter received by the IRS. It came from a taxpayer who wrote that he hadn't slept very well for the past two years. Inside his letter, he included a check for taxes owed in the amount of \$1200. The man signed his name and included a P.S.: "If I don't sleep better in a week, I'll send you another \$1200."

The guy wanted limited relief from his wrongdoing. 1600 years ago Augustine chronicled this attitude that is still common as to how 21st century Christians' deal with sin: "1. Lord, make me good, but not yet. 2. Lord, make me good, but not entirely. 3. Lord, make me good."

Sin needs to be dealt with harshly. We can't be wishy washy as that causes reluctance to fight hard against it. Rather than skirt the issue or make excuses, we need to call sin "sin." This means we need to honestly assess our lives against God's words in the Bible. We need to see sin as ugly, evil, hazardous to us and harmful to our relationship with God.

Chuck Swindoll said, "I have never known anyone who uprooted a deep seated wrong without first becoming sufficiently angry. Anger can stir up motivations. We need to declare an all-out war against wrong in our personal lives. Anything less than that won't work" (Chuck Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, p. 154).

"Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this

they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Peter 4:1 – 5, ESV).

A pastor from Haiti told the story of a man who wanted to sell his house for \$2000. The people who wanted to buy it didn't want to pay that much. Finally, the owner said he'd sell for \$1000 if they allowed him to maintain ownership of a single nail above the front door. They probably thought he was sentimental or a bit loony and agreed. Later, the former owner rethought his decision. He approached the new owners and offered to buy back the house, but they weren't interested. The man left. . . only to return with the carcass of a dog. He hung it from the nail above the door. Since the nail was his property, there was nothing the owners of the rest of the house could do. When the smell got too bad, they sold the property to the devious previous owner. The Haitian pastor said this is the danger of leaving Satan any room. Need to make a complete commitment.

The second issue was the violation of the Sabbath observance. God had commanded Jews that the seventh day was to be wholly consecrated to him. Instead, they desecrated it.

V. 15 onward describes how the people were again working as if the Sabbath was any ordinary run-of-the-mill day. They were treading wine presses and bringing food into Jerusalem to make a quick buck. There were also people from other cities who brought in all sorts of merchandise to sell on the Sabbath.

Nehemiah warned the people and the merchants. He rebuked the leaders for allowing, tolerating and maybe even encouraging the practice. He reminded them that this was the one of the reasons the nation went into exile, that they were doing the same thing that caused God to judge their ancestors.

The governor took preventative steps, probably because he understood the people were weak-willed. He ordered the city gates to be closed prior to the Sabbath and remain closed until the Sabbath was over. In addition, he stationed some of his own men, likely soldiers, to prevent anybody from breaking the Sabbath. A couple times those who wanted to sell their products stayed outside Jerusalem overnight. Nehemiah warned them and threatened he'd lay his hands on them. Does that mean he threatened to hit them or he'd arrest them?

The merchants got the idea and didn't come back. He had the Levites purify themselves, prepare themselves, so they could guard the gates to keep the Sabbath day holy for themselves and all the people.

The third sin was going back to mixed marriages. Read 13:23, 24, 27

The Jewish people were to only marry other Jews because God had chosen them to be set apart for him in a sacred relationship and be totally dedicated to him. They were prohibited from intermarrying with the surrounding nations as intermarriage would almost assuredly lead to the worship of false gods. God wanted his people to stand out from the immoral behavior of the nations that surrounded them. There were exceptions as in the case of Boaz marrying Ruth as she had converted to Judaism.

Nehemiah brought up Solomon and the problems he had. Though he was loved by God and God had made him king over all Israel, he was led into sin by foreign women who convinced him to worship other gods.

The people didn't seem to care what God's standard was. They married who they wanted. They were so lackadaisical about being God's people that they didn't even teach their kiddos how to speak Hebrew.

We mentioned Eliashib's alliance with Tobiah. He was also compromised through his association with Sanballat - another enemy of the Jews. His grandson had married Sanballat's daughter. Family??????

The circumstantial evidence was compelling in a murder trial in Oklahoma where the body hadn't been found. The defense attorney, feeling his client would be convicted, resorted to a trick in his closing statement. He looked at his watch. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you. Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into the courtroom." He turned to look toward the door. This jury was stunned and looked. The minute passed. Nothing happened. The lawyer admitted, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked with anticipation. I, therefore, put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

The jurors were puzzled as the attorney had successfully confused them. They retired to deliberate but returned in just a couple minutes and pronounced a guilty verdict. Now the lawyer was confused. "But how? You must have had some doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door." The jury foreman answered, "Oh, we did look. But your client didn't."

The guy knew he'd committed the crime. The people of Nehemiah's day recognized they had done wrong again and were willing to pay the consequences.

Nehemiah acted to correct the situation. He rebuked the people, called curses down on them, beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. Scripture doesn't say he took the proper approach and it certainly wouldn't be the one we should revert to in settling arguments, disagreements and conflict.....

He made the people take an oath in God's name declaring they wouldn't participate in intermarriages. As for the high priest's grandson - Nehemiah drove him away. "Scoot! Get out of here!" Then the governor prayed that God would remember those who were unrepentant about violating God's covenant. He was turning them over to God for judgment. He believed the Lord was better qualified to fill that role.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we're to uphold God's view of marriage. The Lord created marriage as a sacred relationship bringing two people who are in a right relationship with him to be united as one to him. Marriage is to be monogamous and permanent as it's a covenant made between a man, a woman and God.

The final action taken by Nehemiah was to purify the priests, setting them apart and reminding them of their special and unique service for God and the people. He removed anything that didn't belong or coexist with service for God. He assigned duties and made provision for them to be able to accomplish their tasks.

We don't need to dig up sins of the past and revisit them. When we admit to God we've committed sin and desire to turn from it, we can be assured that God forgives us. When we sense or feel guilt over things that we've previously confessed, there's no need to relive it. Move on.

James Garfield was inaugurated as President on March 2, 1881. On July 2nd he was the victim of an assassination attempt. He was shot twice. Doctors removed one bullet but couldn't find the other and warned him he probably wouldn't survive the night. He did and started feeling better. However, doctors were obsessed with finding the bullet. They repeatedly invaded the wound with unsterilized hands. They even enlisted the help

of Alexander Graham Bell who devised a metal detector but wasn't able to locate the bullet. Doctors continued to probe and Garfield's condition worsened till he died 79 days after he'd been shot - not from the bullet but from the numerous infections caused by the doctors continued probing.

When we dwell on sins that have been forgiven or have previously plagued us, we do harm to ourselves.

This last chapter reveals more times when Nehemiah prayed. The request is for God to remember him.

Read 13:14, 22, 31

Nehemiah could have given up when the people turned their backs on God. He could have determined it wasn't worth the time and effort. People weren't going to change and he might as well understand that's the way things were. He should just go back to Babylon, work for the king and forget he ever travelled to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah didn't throw his hands in the air and quit. He kept fighting for God and fighting for people to follow God and fighting for himself. He didn't give up. He wanted God to remember him for how he had faithfully acted. He wanted what he had done to last and have an effect. He wanted God to show him mercy according to his great love. He wanted it as a reward for how he had upheld God's wishes and desires.

The last remember, in v. 31, is simply to be remembered with favor. Nehemiah's desire was to please and serve the Lord. He desperately wanted God to show him mercy according to God's great love.

Each of these pleas for remembrance is spoken to "my God." Nehemiah had a personal relationship with God. He wasn't thinking of some god so far away, that was unknown, with whom he was trying to make an appeal and hopefully get on the good graces of some creature. He viewed God as personal and relatable.

We can be tempted to draw the conclusion that whatever we're doing in the Lord's work isn't worth the time and effort. It can be hard to keep from giving up when people turn their backs on God. It's tough when we see people put their trust in self or something other than God even though they know better.

We're to have confidence in God and trust his mercy and love. We're to leave room for the grace of God which gives us hope. We need to remember that God keeps loving people even though they ignore him or disobey. We can turn to ourselves and see ourselves as an example of God's continual love, grace, kindness, mercy. If God acted and acts that way toward us, he'll act with love toward others as well.

The idea of asking God to remember is a recurring theme throughout Nehemiah. Earlier in our study I asked for what you might be asking God to remember you or the church family. Did you include your acts of service, love, time, energy, effort expended in VBS, Awana, youth, Christmas outreaches, trying to get into the community, interest in missions, faithfulness, perseverance, prayer, ways you spoke and showed love, for giving and forgiving, the godly leadership, for sacrifices made, for hearts that have broken in pieces and gotten stomped into the ground yet you maintained trust in Christ and desire to serve him.

As it says in another scripture: "God is not unjust, he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised" (Hebrews 6:10 - 12).