

The Danger of Drifting

Nehemiah 13:1–14 | When Reform Reaches the Heart

The day the celebration faded — and what Nehemiah did about it.

THE PASSAGE — Nehemiah 13:1–14 (NKJV)

Nehemiah 13:14, *"Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its services!"*

Nehemiah 12 ends with a sound — joy heard afar off. The wall is finished. The dedication is done. The people are celebrating at full volume. It is the high point of the entire book.

Nehemiah 13 is the chapter nobody planned. It opens with a public reading of the Law — and immediately exposes a compromise the community had not noticed. Chapter 13 asks the harder question: what happens to the people of God when the celebration is over?

Introduction — The Morning After

The Morning After Gettysburg

On the evening of **3 July 1863**, the Union Army had just repelled Pickett's Charge. The **battle of Gettysburg** was over. It was the turning point of the American Civil War.

The next morning, **General Meade's** officers expected a

counterattack, a full pursuit, a decisive end to the campaign. Instead, the army was exhausted. Supplies were depleted. The discipline that had held through the battle began to loosen.

***Lincoln** famously wrote that Meade had allowed 'a golden opportunity' to slip away. The war would continue for nearly two more years not because the battle was lost, but because the momentum of victory was not sustained.*

***Nehemiah 13** is the morning after the celebration. The wall is up. The dedication is done. The enemy has been silenced. And it is precisely then in the stillness after the singing that the drift begins.*

The great danger for the people of God is not the moment of crisis. Crisis produces prayer, sacrifice, and solidarity.

The great danger is the moment of **success**, when the walls are up, the songs are sung, and the guards relax.

Nehemiah 13 records what happened when one man refused to let the morning after becoming the morning of permanent compromise.

This is not a chapter about enemies outside the wall. It is a chapter about what moved inside the wall when nobody was watching. The greatest threats to the people of God are not the ones who mock from a distance they are the ones who are given a room.

I. The Word that exposed the Compromise (V 1–3)

Nehemiah 13:1–3, *On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God,² because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing.³ So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.*

A. On that Day — The text Defines the Moment

V 1, "***On that day***" opens with a phrase that connects chapter 13 directly to chapter 12.

- The same day as the dedication.
- The same day as the great celebration.
- The same day the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.

Before the drift could even begin to be named, the people gathered to hear the Law read. This is not incidental. It is the hinge on which the entire chapter turns.

- It was not a prophet who arrived with a vision.
- It was not Nehemiah who noticed a problem.
- It was **the Book of Moses** read aloud in the hearing of the whole assembly that exposed what needed to change.

The reform in Nehemiah 13 begins not with a leader's inspection but with a congregation's encounter with Scripture. The Word of God,

heard publicly, was sufficient to reveal the compromise and demand a response.

Qārā’ — to read aloud, to call out — not private study; a public proclamation before the whole assembly. The Law was meant to be heard together

Nimṣā’ — it was found written the passive form is deliberate; no human authority discovered this; the text found them; the Law found the gap

B. What the Law said — and why it mattered?

The text they encountered was from **Deuteronomy 23:3–6**, “*An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord forever, ⁴because they did not meet you with bread and water on the road when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. ⁵Nevertheless the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam, but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you. ⁶You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days forever.*”

No Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God because they had hired Balaam to curse Israel and had not met the people with bread and water on the journey from Egypt.

- It was not an ethnic prejudice.
- It was a covenant boundary.

These were nations that had actively opposed the purposes of God, nations whose presence in the assembly represented an unresolved hostility to the very God Israel worshipped.

The significance becomes sharp when you remember who Tobiah was. **Tobiah the Ammonite** the man who had mocked the wall, accused Nehemiah of rebellion, and whose furniture would shortly be found in the Temple storerooms belonged to the people specifically excluded by this law.

The Law did not merely set a boundary. It named, in advance, the exact category of person who should never have been given a room in the house of God.

Ammonite — the descendants of Lot's son Ben-Ammi. The law was clear, ancient, and written; Eliashib had not acted in ignorance but in disregard of a known commandment

Dābār the word, the matter — the same root as the word of the LORD. What they heard was not merely regulation but the living word of the covenant God.

C. They Separated — The immediate Obedience.

V 3, *So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.*

This is one of the most compressed acts of obedience in the book.

There was no committee.

No extended consultation.

No debate about whether the ancient law was still applicable.

They heard.

They obeyed.

This immediate response to the Law is the pattern **Nehemiah 13** sets from its very first verses.

The question the entire chapter asks is whether the same obedience will be maintained when Nehemiah is not present?

When it is no longer the public day of celebration, but the ordinary fabric of everyday life.

The answer, as the chapter unfolds this is not done automatically.

- Not without a leader who is paying attention.
- Not without the courage to act on what the Law has already said.

The Josiah Principle

*In **2 Kings 22**, the Book of the Law was discovered in the Temple during repairs ordered by King Josiah. When it was read to him, he tore his clothes — a sign of grief and repentance — and immediately set about the most sweeping reform in Judah's history.*

He did not say: "This law is old. Times have changed."

He said: "Our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book."

*The pattern is identical to **Nehemiah 13:1–3**.*

The Law is read.

The gap between the Law and the community's life is exposed.

The response is immediate and costly separation from what the Law forbids.

Every genuine reform in biblical history begins at the same place: someone hears the Word of God and takes it seriously enough to act on it even when the action is inconvenient, unpopular, or overdue.

Reform does not begin with a leader's insight. It begins with the hearing of the Word.

Nehemiah 13:1–3 establishes the foundation: when the Law speaks, the community must listen and when the community listens, it must separate from what the Law names.

II. The Compromise in the Temple (V 4–9)

The enemy was given a room in the house of God

A. The Man Who Opened the Door (V 4–6)

Nehemiah 13:4–6, Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, was allied with Tobiah. ⁵ And he had prepared for him a large room, where previously they had stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, the tithes of grain, the new wine and oil, which were commanded to be given to the Levites and singers and gatekeepers, and the offerings for the priests. ⁶ But during all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Then after certain days I obtained leave from the king.

Before the crisis can be understood, the text insists on naming the man who made it possible.

V4, *“Now before this, Eliashib the priest... was allied with Tobiah.”*

The word translated “allied” is the Hebrew *qārōb* — to be near, to be close, to be in an intimate relationship.

Eliashib was not a passive bystander swept along by events. He was personally, relationally close to the man who had opposed the work of God from the very beginning.

This is not a small detail. **Eliashib was the high priest.**

- He had stood at the dedication of the wall.
- He had participated in the great covenant renewal of chapter 10.
- He was the custodian of the most sacred spaces in Israel.

The intimacy Eliashib had with Tobiah was the intimacy reserved for approach to God. (Leviticus 10)

V 5, *And he had prepared for him a large room, where previously they had stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, the tithes of grain, the new wine and oil, which were commanded to be given to the Levites and singers and gatekeepers, and the offerings for the priests.*

A large room. The text is precise. This was not a modest concession but a significant reallocation of sacred space for a personal relationship.

This reveals the full scope of what he had done.

The room he prepared for Tobiah was not a spare chamber. It was the room that had previously held the grain offerings, the frankincense, the tithes of grain, new wine and oil.

Everything commanded by God to be stored for the Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and priests.

The room was not empty before Tobiah moved in.

It was occupied with the material provision of God's covenant community.

Tobiah did not take an unused space. He displaced what was holy.

V 6, But during all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Then after certain days I obtained leave from the king,

"But during all this I was not in Jerusalem."

Nehemiah had returned to Babylon at the end of his twelve-year term as governor required by his arrangement with King Artaxerxes.

I was not in Jerusalem. The passive structure emphasises absence not abandonment. Nehemiah did not fail to watch. He was not permitted to stay.

The drift did not happen under his watch.

It happened precisely in the gap created by his absence.

This is the text's sober observation: **Reform sustained by the presence of a single leader is always provisional.** The real test of a

community's character is what it does when the reformer is not in the room.

Three observations on how the drift began in V 4–6.

It began with a relationship: Eliashib was allied with Tobiah. Compromise rarely begins with a decision, but it begins with a closeness that slowly overrides a boundary.

It was done by a trusted leader: The high priest did not act without authority. He had both position and access. The greater the trust, the greater the capacity to normalise what should not be normal.

It happened in the absence of accountability: Nehemiah was not in Jerusalem. No one stepped into his role. The drift does not need an invitation, but it only needs an absence.

The drift in Nehemiah 13 did not begin with an attack from outside. It began with an alliance on the inside a trusted man, an absent accountability, and a sacred room quietly reassigned. Eliashib's alliance with Tobiah is the anatomy of every compromise that has ever undone a community.

B. How Tobiah got a Room?

While Nehemiah was in Babylon absent from Jerusalem, serving the king something extraordinary happened in the Temple.

Eliashib the priest, who was **in charge of the storerooms of the house of God**, prepared a room for **Tobiah the Ammonite**.

- This was not a secret.

- This was not a conspiracy.

It was the slow, incremental normalisation of compromise by a man who was trusted.

Tobiah was the man who had said a fox could knock down the wall. He had accused Nehemiah of rebellion. He had opposed the work of God at every turn. And now — he had a room in the Temple.

‘Aliyyāh — upper room — a significant chamber. Eliashib did not give Tobiah a corner cupboard. He gave him a central guest suite in the house of God

How compromise enters a community:

It rarely arrives announced — it is given a small space by a trusted leader

It begins as accommodation — "he is not so bad; we can manage this"

It displaces something holy — the storerooms held offerings, tithes, temple vessels

It becomes normal — and those around it stop seeing it as a problem

C. What Nehemiah did when he found it?

Nehemiah 13:7–8, and I came to Jerusalem and discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God.⁸ And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in Nehemiah 13:7, he was not looking for a crisis. He came back after his permitted leave in Babylon to resume his role.

He saw what had been done.

V 8, *"And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room."*

The Hebrew word is **ṛā'ā'** — to be broken, to be shattered, to be deeply disturbed. This is not mild disappointment. This is the grief of a man who understands what has been desecrated.

And then he acts. Without committees. Without lengthy consultations.

He throws out all of Tobiah's household goods. He orders the rooms to be purified. He restores the sacred vessels, the grain offerings, and the frankincense.

Hezekiah Clears the Temple

In 2 Chronicles 29, King Hezekiah came to the throne after years of spiritual compromise under his father Ahaz. The Temple had been closed. The lampstands extinguished. The altars defiled.

Hezekiah's first act — on the first day of his reign — was to open the doors of the Temple and begin purifying it. He did not wait. He did not negotiate with the past.

When the corruption is in the sanctuary, the only response that honours God is removal, not management.

Nehemiah understood this. The storeroom was not a small matter. It was the heart of the community's covenant life. And what was living in the heart had to go.

The enemy had been given a room in the house of God. Nehemiah removed the furniture and restored the fragrance. What has been given a room in your life that should not be there?

III. The Abandonment of the Levites (V 10–13)

When God's servants are not supported, they leave

Nehemiah 13:10–11, *I also realized that the portions for the Levites had not been given them; for each of the Levites and the singers who did the work had gone back to his field. ¹¹ So I contended with the rulers, and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” And I gathered them together and set them in their place.*

A. What Nehemiah found when he looked?

The second crisis Nehemiah encounters is less dramatic than Tobiah's room but equally devastating in its consequences.

The people had stopped bringing their tithes to the storerooms.

The Levites and singers, the musicians and ministers of the house of God had not received their portions.

So, they had done what any person does when they cannot sustain their calling. They went back to their fields to survive.

The **house of God was forsaken**.

- Not dramatically.
- Not publicly.
- Not by an enemy who knocked the door down.

It was forsaken because the people stopped supporting the work of God with their resources — and the workers had no choice but to leave.

ḥālāqāh — the allotted portions — the systematic provision God had designed into the covenant for those who served full-time at the Temple.

‘āzab — to forsake, to abandon — the same word used when Israel forsook the Lord (Jeremiah 2:13); here applied to the house of God itself.

B. The Connection between Tobiah's room and the empty Storerooms.

These two crises are not unrelated. They are the same crisis seen from different angles.

Eliashib had converted the storerooms designed for tithes, offerings, and the support of Levites into a guest suite for the enemy of God's work.

Of course, the Levites had no portions. Their portions had been displaced. The room that should have held their provision was holding Tobiah's furniture.

When the wrong things occupy the spaces intended for God, the right things are crowded out. This is not incidental. It is structural.

Three questions the empty storerooms ask:

Is the work of God in this community properly resourced or are the servants scraping by while other things are prioritised?

Have the "storerooms" of your own life (time, money, attention) been given to what was meant to fill them?

What has occupied the space that was designed for God's purposes and who has had to leave because of it?

The Levites did not abandon the house of God.

The house of God abandoned them.

Nehemiah's question is still being asked:

"Why is the house of God forsaken?"

IV. The Courage of a Single Contender (V 11)

One man asked the question nobody else was asking

Nehemiah 13:11, *"So I contended with the rulers, and said, 'Why is the house of God forsaken?' And I gathered them together and set them in their place."*

A. Nehemiah Contended.

The Hebrew word *rib* — to contend, to bring a legal dispute, to confront with argument and authority — is not a soft word.

Nehemiah did not send a memo. He did not commission a review. He did not wait for the next community assembly.

He confronted the rulers directly. He named what had happened: *"Why is the house of God forsaken?"* The question is accusatory. It does not ask who was responsible. It demands an answer from those who *were* responsible.

Leadership that will not ask the uncomfortable question when the house of God is in decline is not protecting the community. It is enabling its drift.

Rib — to contend, plead, dispute — used in legal contexts; Nehemiah is not merely "complaining"; he is bringing a covenant charge against the leaders

B. He Set them in their place.

V 11, *So I contended with the rulers, and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their place.*

A remarkable brevity to say that *"I gathered them together and set them in their place."*

After the confrontation comes the reconstruction. Nehemiah does not merely identify the problem — he rebuilds the system. He reassigns the Levites.

C. The People respond — When reform is preached, the Faithful return (V 12)

Nehemiah 13:12, *Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the storehouse.*

This is one of the most quietly remarkable verses in the chapter.

After Nehemiah has confronted the rulers and reassembled the scattered Levites, a single sentence describes the people's response: *"Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the storehouse."*

All Judah.

Not a remnant.

Not the willing minority.

The collective response of the whole community.

When the storehouse had been cleared of Tobiah's furniture and the Levites had been restored to their posts, the people of Judah returned to their covenantal obligation.

The structural reform called out the communal faithfulness that had been lying dormant. The tithes had not stopped flowing because the people were hostile to God. They had stopped flowing because the system had been broken at the top. When the leadership acted with integrity, the people followed.

The verse also brings the storeroom full circle.

- In verse 5, the room had held grain, wine, and oil and all of it had been displaced by Tobiah's household goods.
- In verse 12, grain, new wine, and oil return to the storehouse.

The text is precise: what was taken out of the room in verse 8 made space for what poured back in verse 12.

Nehemiah's act of removal was not merely symbolic. It was structural. The space had to be cleared before the right things could fill it.

Nehemiah did not address the people's failure to tithe as a primary moral failure. He addressed the systemic collapse that had made faithful giving impossible.

When the storehouse was occupied by the wrong things, and when the Levites had retreated to their fields, there was nowhere to bring the tithe and no one to receive it.

V 12 teaches that faithfulness in the congregation is often waiting for faithfulness in the leadership.

When reform reaches the structure, it releases the obedience of the people.

What verse 12 asks of leaders and communities:

► **Before diagnosing disobedience in the congregation, ask what structural failure may have made obedience impossible?**

Nehemiah corrected the structure before the people's response

was even requested.

► **When the wrong things are removed and the right things are restored, faithfulness often resurfaces?**

The people of Judah were not hardhearted; they were waiting for a cleared path.

► **If you have been waiting to give, waiting to serve, waiting to return to a commitment that drifted verse 12 invites you to bring what is in your hand now.**

The storehouse has been cleared. The Levites are in their place. There is somewhere to bring it.

The tithes returned not because the people were commanded anew but because the structure was repaired.

V 12 is the proof that Nehemiah's reform was not punitive — it was restorative.

When the right things are put back in their place, the people of God tend to bring what belongs there.

V 13, *And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouse Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah; and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and their task was to distribute to their brethren.*

He restores the personnel. He creates accountability structures with named treasurers responsible for the distribution.

Reform is not merely the removal of what is wrong. It is the restoration of what was right. Nehemiah does both in the same passage.

Wilberforce and the Abolition Society

***William Wilberforce** did not merely oppose the slave trade in Parliament. He also helped found the **Proclamation Society**, the **Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor**, and dozens of other institutions designed to replace what the slave economy had displaced.*

His biographers note that he was not a purely negative reformer. He understood that you cannot simply remove evil — you must build structures that embody the good you are defending.

Nehemiah operates on the same principle. Tobiah's furniture is thrown out — and the sacred vessels are put back. The Levites are gathered — and a proper distribution system is established.

The work of reform is always both negative and positive: remove the wrong, restore the right.

One man asked the question nobody was asking. One man confronted the rulers nobody was confronting. One man restored what the drift had displaced. Nehemiah 13 is a study in the courage of a single contender.

V. The Prayer of a Faithful Servant (V 14)

What drives the reformer is not ambition but remembrance

Nehemiah 13:14, *"Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its services!"*

A. The Anatomy of Nehemiah's Prayer

V 14 is one of the most personal moments in the entire book. After the confrontation, the restructuring, the restoration of the Levites, Nehemiah turns not to the community but to God.

The prayer is striking in its honesty. It does not claim credit. It does not demand reward. It asks God to **remember**.

The Hebrew **zākar** is a covenant word. When the Old Testament says God 'remembered' His people, it does not mean He had forgotten them — it means He was about to *act* on their behalf. Nehemiah is asking God to act for him the way he has acted for God.

Noah in the ark, Israel in Egypt, Hannah in the Temple God's remembrance always precedes God's action.

Hesed — steadfast love, covenant loyalty — the same quality Nehemiah is implicitly appealing to. He has shown hesed to the house of God and asks God to show it in return.

B. The Motivation Behind the Reform

Nehemiah's prayer in **V 14** reveals the engine of his reforming work.

He did not throw out Tobiah's furniture to make a name for himself. He did not restore the Levites to gain political standing. He did not confront the rulers to demonstrate authority.

He did these things **for the house of my God**. The phrase appears twice in a single verse. The motivation is explicit and personal. It is love for the house of God that drives the reform.

The reformer who acts from love for God's house, rather than from love of being right, will endure the loneliness and resistance of reform. The one who acts from ego will collapse when the opposition comes.

The arc of Nehemiah's prayer life throughout the book:

Ch. 1 — Nehemiah weeps and prays for four months over the ruins

Ch. 2 — He prays an arrow prayer before answering the king

Ch. 4 — He prays against those who mock the work

Ch. 6 — He prays for strength when the enemy offers a false meeting

Ch. 13:14 — He prays for God's remembrance after the hard work of reform

Every act of courage in this book has a prayer behind it.

Nehemiah did not ask God to punish his enemies. He asked God to remember his faithfulness. The reformer's reward is not vindication in the eyes of people. It is remembrance in the eyes of God.

Conclusion — What do we with the morning after?

The celebration of chapter 12 was real. The joy was real. The wall was real.

But chapter 13 teaches that what we do in the ordinary days after the extraordinary moment reveals more about our faith than the moment itself.

Nehemiah 13:1–14 is not a discouraging chapter.

It is a clarifying one.

It asks: **who is living in the rooms that belong to God?**

Are the servants of the house properly supported?

Is there someone willing to ask the question nobody else is asking?

Nehemiah, who came back, looked, grieved, acted, and prayed. Not a perfect man!

A faithful one. A man who did not drift when the conditions for drifting were ideal.

Application — Living the Reform

1. Take an inventory of the rooms.

What has been given space in your life, your home, your church, that does not belong there — and has quietly displaced something holy? Name it. Remove the furniture.

2. Support the servants of the house.

The Levites went back to their fields because nobody was bringing the tithes. Ask honestly: are the people who give

themselves to the work of God in your community properly resourced and honoured?

3. Ask the question nobody is asking.

Nehemiah's contention with the rulers required courage. Is there a "why is the house of God forsaken?" question that your community needs someone to ask? Be willing to be the one who asks it.

4. Let your motivation be love, not correctness.

The reformer who is driven by the love of being right will not survive the long obedience. The one who acts from love for the house of God will. Examine what is driving you.