

## WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM BACKSLIDERS

### Nehemiah 7

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This is a chapter I had really intended to skip over when I started through Nehemiah and we wound up last Sunday taking a whole message on the first three verses. I thought I'd skip directly from verse 4 on to chapter 8. The rest of Nehemiah 7 doesn't look all that fruitful. But as I got into it this week it kind of got interesting.

It's amazing to me that even the deadest portions of the word of God (that look that way on the surface) may not actually be that dead. The Spirit may have had the intention of putting that in there for a specific reason.

I'm not going to read the chapter in its entirety. I am going to read selected portions. "Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. [Remember the walls had been constructed but now the people needed to be consolidated inside the walls.] So my God put it in my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return. This is what I found written there: 'These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town, in company with Zerubbabel'" (Nehemiah 7:4-7, NIV), and then 1100 names are given. A lengthy list is given. And included in those men are men of Anathoth, verse 27. Priests come back. Levites come back, verse 43. Singers come back, descendants of Asaph the choir leader under David. The gatekeepers come back. Temple servants, descendants of the servants of Solomon, some people come back who cannot prove their genealogical descent among the common people of Judah,

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verse 61, and among priests, verse 63. Then there's a summary of the company that came back in verse 66. The whole company numbered 42,360 besides their 7,337 menservants and maidservants. They also had 245 men and women singers. What a strange company! There were 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys. "Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work" (verse 70, NIV). This would have been the rebuilding of the temple. The governor gave the treasurer 1,000 drachmas of gold. That is about nineteen pounds, 50 bowls and 530 garments for priests. Some of the heads of the families gave to the treasure for the work 20,000 drachmas of gold (that's about 375 pounds) and 2,200 minas of silver, the total given by the rest of the people were 20,000 drachmas of gold, 2,000 minas of silver and 67 garments for priests. The priests, Levites, gatekeepers and singers and the temple servants along with certain people and the rest of the Israelites settled in their towns.

This is a roster. This whole chapter is a roster of persons who are the sons of backsliders. I think therefore we can appropriately learn some lessons from this chapter by drawing on resources even outside this chapter in Scripture: "Lessons we can learn from backsliders."

I grew up with the term "backsliders" very frequently used. I've not heard it used a great deal lately. It is, however, a scriptural term. It's used not for a person who accidentally slips and falls. I have some picture in my mind of a person climbing up a mountain and then they make a mistake of some kind and come on back. This is really not the idea in the root of "backslider". The idea of a backslider is someone who has been following the Lord and then turns away or turns back from following the Lord. It's not an accidental step. It's a deliberate step of the will. It's not continuing to walk with God. Before the children of Israel and especially the southern part of Judah and Benjamin were led away into captivity the prophets continually warned the people of God that they were walking as backsliders. Jeremiah uses the term more than any other

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prophet. Jeremiah had this incredible calling upon his life to spend his whole life telling his people to surrender to a foreign nation because they had so sinned against God there was no hope that God was going to do anything other than to lead them into captivity. Jeremiah continually makes the lament that the people of God had turned to backsliding. In fact, Jeremiah 8:5 he says the people have gone to perpetual backsliding.

In the background is the fact that in 586 B.C., or 141 years before Nehemiah, there was a final fall of Jerusalem and Judah. The people were carried away by Babylon because of their backsliding. Then some years went by where the captives were in Babylonian; the psalmist says, “By the waters of Babylon we hung our harps and wept. How can we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land” (Psalm 137). But then in the mercy of God a group of people returned to the land. This is the group that Nehemiah records in Nehemiah 7. What’s puzzling is as you read Nehemiah you might think that once Nehemiah rebuilt the wall, what Nehemiah 7 reflects is a census of the people inside of the wall at the time of Nehemiah. This, strangely enough, is not the case at all. The names that are in Nehemiah 7 are not people who were contemporary with Nehemiah. The names in Nehemiah 7 are found in Ezra 2. In fact these names occupy two large chapters in the Old Testament—Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 are identical to one another in most all respects. They constitute the names of the people who came back with a governor, a descendent of David called Zerubbabel 93 years before Nehemiah rebuilds the wall. If you can imagine pulling our a record of your ancestors 93 years back. You hardly know those folks. 93 years is reaching quite a long ways back. Exactly what Nehemiah is doing here, and in this genealogical record we have the people whom god showed mercy upon who had returned from their place of exile and captivity because they had been backsliders. So in reality Nehemiah 7 is a roster of the names of the persons who are the children of backsliders.

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There are several principles that I think can be deduced off of this. One of these is certainly the principle that...

#### **I. Turning away from the Lord does wreak havoc in our lives.**

The people who are listed in Nehemiah 7 come from a parentage that is described in 2 Chronicles 36:15–18. Let me reflect what happened in a whole company of people that walk a way from God. “The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was roused against his people and there was no remedy. He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and spared neither young man nor young woman, old man or aged. God handed all of them over to Nebuchadnezzar” (verses 15–17, NIV).

**A.** The first result of the backsliding that occurred a century and a half before Nehemiah was that it had brought about lost families. If that isn’t a picture in a New Testament reality of what happens when a family unit, a mom and a dad, walk with God and then turn back and go away. So often it is the case that when families are affected thereby, the children whose lives are precious to the Lord no longer have a model and an influence by which to live. Lost family.

**B.** The next thing to happen to these who have turned astray against God is the fact that they lost their spiritual resources. Nebuchadnezzar in 2 Chronicles 36:18 carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the Lord’s temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. These were the instruments that were used in their worship practices. Again, when we have turned away from the Lord, what is taken away from us are

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spiritual resources, by which we came into the Lord's presence and worship and pray and read His word and share our faith.

C. Backsliders, as well, lost the temple itself, the place of ministry which they had. The Babylonians set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem.

I think I have yet to meet a person who walked with the Lord and turned away who is not miserable inside. I have yet to meet a person who really knew what it is to walk with the Lord then became careless in their life, in their Christian experience and really began to drift away from the Lord who is saying, "It is better for me now that I have drifted away from the Lord than it was when I walked with the Lord."

It is an awesome thing to turn away from the Lord. Havoc is the inevitable consequence in our life. God really puts Scriptures like Nehemiah 7 and 2 Chronicles 36 and elsewhere in the Old Testament into our lives to give us the warning of the peril of becoming careless in our Christian walk. The message this morning may not so much apply to you if you have not had or are not now in an experience of turning away from the Lord, backsliding, going back on that initial commitment and first love you had for the Lord. It may simply be there as a warning to say to you, do not consider turning back from the Lord.

The Scripture is replete with illustrations of the fact that turning away from the Lord brings havoc and devastation.

**II. The second principle that arises from backsliding is that the Lord does not give up no matter how severe the backsliding.**

This is the incredible nature of God. This by the way, directly contradicts our emotions, which are telling us if we have turned away from the Lord, God has so given up on you, you don't have another chance. One chance and that's all. Blow that chance and you'll never get another chance,

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Judah has been carried away into captivity. The exiles might well wonder, “Will it ever be different? Will we ever come back to the land? Will God ever restore us?” Hosea writes to people when they’re in the process of backsliding, before they had been carried away into captivity. God is so married to His unfaithful people, and Hosea’s own life was used as a model of that, that in spite of the going away of His own people, God declares through the lips of Hosea, “How can I give you up, O Israel. How can I surrender you, O Ephraim” (Hosea 11:8). The names in Nehemiah 7 are a witness to the fact that God does not give up. If God had given up these names would not be here. They would have perished from the record of humanity. But the fact that they are there is an indication that God remains faithful to His people even when His people are unfaithful to Him. We must not think by any stretch of the imagination that our relationship with God is totally based on our faithfulness. Over and above our faithfulness is the faithfulness of God.

In Nehemiah 7 that faithfulness of God is seen in the fact that among the list of people that are brought back He brings back some of the most unlikely people. I think it’s deliberate on the part of Ezra and Nehemiah to remind us in verse 27 that among the people that come back from captivity are men of Anathoth. Does that ring a bell with you? Jeremiah was from the hometown of Anathoth, a little town outside of Jerusalem. Jeremiah had this lifelong call which stretched over decades and decades to preach one message. That message was surrender. He was about as popular as someone would be today if they ran for office in this country on the platform that God is going to judge America for its sins; and rather than putting up a resistance, we need to let the judgment come early and surrender to the Soviet Union. That person would have about as much chance getting elected to an office or even voted in as a pastor anywhere in this country. There aren’t that many people in this country that believe better red than dead.

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Jeremiah was that kind of strange prophet. He was a man of sorrows. It's not hard to see why with a message like that. But God wouldn't release him from that one message. Anathoth was his hometown. His hometown was embarrassed by the prophet. In fact we are told in Jeremiah that men of Anathoth sought his life. And threatened him. They didn't appreciate this message the slightest bit at all.

But even though the men of Anathoth sought his life, when Nebuchadnezzar surrounded the city walls of Jerusalem and was besieging it, Jeremiah did this really strange thing. He goes and buys a field at Anathoth. I'd think when a country is just about to be taken over by a foreign power and real estate prices are going to change overnight that the dumbest thing in the world is to try to buy land when the whole country is going down the tubes. But this is exactly what Jeremiah does. He buys a piece of property at Anathoth at the very worst possible time. As a prophetic instrument this says, "Even though we're going away, the return to this land is so sure that I the prophet of God who has said all of this devastation is going to occur attest to the fact that when the devastation is over God will return us and as a result I'm buying land in advance." He bought that land one hundred years before any of his family would later possess it.

Nehemiah 7 says men of Anathoth came back. The very village which had been the most dead set against their hometown prophet's message, in the mercy of God is brought back. That's an incredible illustration of the mercy of God. But the people who responded most to the prophet are back in the land.

God also in Nehemiah 7 is showing us His great grace, and in showing us the fact that He does not give up, indicates that He is continuing His purpose of redemption. Notice in 7:7 you'll find the word "Zerubbabel." We learn from Ezra 3:2 that Zerubbabel was the son of a man named Shealtiel. Matthew 1:12-13, in the genealogy of the Lord, gives his name. What has God been

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doing while His people were in captivity? Preserving the Messianic line. Preserving the line of David. Here is an ancestor of the Lord Jesus in Nehemiah 7, the one who had brought the people back—Zerubbabel. Somehow, no matter how great the rebellion of Judah was against the Lord, it did not frustrate His purposes of redemption centuries before when it looked like redemption hung on a slender thread. God was yet working through the lineage of one family. In Nehemiah 7, the presence of the names of Zerubbabel and men of Anathoth is an attestation of the fact that God does not go back on his promises.

Centuries before He had made promises to Abraham that He would make his seed a blessed seed and a seed which no one could number. Centuries before Nehemiah He had promised to David that He would give him an everlasting kingdom and the time when it looked the darkest that it couldn't be done, God is at work keeping His word. God does not give up.

### **III. There are also some other things that can be noted from these chapters. Some consequences of backsliding are evident when we return.**

Even though God has not given upon us here are certain losses that we have incurred by some moments in our life walking away from the Lord. The losses are articulated for us in Nehemiah 7.

**A.** There are losses for example, in population. There are 42,360 people that come back. In David's census, which is the high point in Israel's history, 2 Samuel 24:9, there were 800,000 men in Israel and 500,000 men in Judah. A population of men alone at one point of three million. Now the population, because of backsliding, has gone all the way down from 1.3 million to 42,360.

The Levites in David's time, according to 1 Chronicles 23:3, numbered 38,000. Now there are a total of Levites made up of gatekeepers, musicians, and singers of 4649. A drop of 34,000.

In David's time, 1 Chronicles 23, there were 4000 singers. Now here are 148 singers.



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In David's time 4000 gatekeepers; now 138 gatekeepers. And even some have lost the record of their lineage. So here has been a tremendous toll on people because of the backsliding.

**B.** There's also been a tremendous loss of resources. The inventory of what the exiles brought back from Babylon. They brought back 736 horses. Solomon had 12,000 horses alone. Here's a whole company that their whole pool of horses is 736. Whereas in the days before the backsliding one man, the king, had 12,000.

They had 435 camels among them. Job, a single individual had 3000 camels and later doubled it to 6000. In the days when the Israelites were fresh into the land, two and a half tribes in 1 Chronicles 5 captured 50,000 camels in a conflict, in a war with a group of people in the land. Now down to much fewer.

6,720 donkeys. Israel at one point had captured 61,000 donkeys when it was getting ready to go into the land, Numbers 31.

Now their inventory, of course, reads differently from ours. We would have Chevrolets, Caldillacs, Fords, Volkswagens, and the like. This was their means of conveyance. The point is, they have decreased.

**C.** Nowhere is their decrease more acutely seen than the losses in temple value. They, for example, have a total contribution to the temple of 41,000 drachmas. If you add the totals in verses 70 and 71 and 72 it comes to 41,000 drachmas of gold for the temple or 769 pounds. You say that's no little amount. But that's nothing compared to what they had before they had backslidden. David at one point had collected for the gold in the temple 3,750 tons of gold, according to 1 Chronicles 22:14. That amounts to 36 billion dollars on the current market. Gold was valued a little differently in their culture than ours, but it still was a precious metal.

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Solomon received 25 tons of gold a year just simply as tribute. That's an annual income of 240 million dollars. When the Queen of Sheba visited him she brought a small 4.5 tons of gold, or 43 million dollars in current value.

These poor people bring back 3.5 million.

Even before the children of Israel had settled into the land, and before they got wealthy, when they were just out in the wilderness and had put that tabernacle up—flimsy in comparison to the temple that Solomon built—the gold that they used in that tabernacle (remember they were just coming out of captivity in Egypt but they had at that time one ton of gold to build that tabernacle), now they're going to rebuild the temple and they have 769 pounds. They don't even have a half ton of gold to do it.

The silver, they come back and they have a total of one and seven-twelfths tons of silver. David had 37,500 tons of silver when he collected to build the temple. The tabernacle had three and three-quarter tons of silver. There's an incredibly strange passage in Ezra 3:11–13: It says that when they constructed the temple, “All the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away” (NIV). Two shouts when the temple under Zerubbabel was constructed: One, of the young people who never saw the old temple and had just seen three and a half million dollars of gold plowed into it. They're saying, “Yeah! The temple is built. Praise the Lord!” The old people are saying, “We saw Solomon's temple.” And you could not distinguish the sound of weeping from the sound of rejoicing.

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The backsliding had indeed exerted an enormous toll. Lest we dwell on the negative, if Judah had stayed backslidden its losses would have become even more severe. Getting back in God's way allows the work of restoration to begin.

**IV. Another principle that comes from Nehemiah 7 is that without repentance from the heart, backsliding will start all over again.**

Indeed the legacy of the people in Nehemiah 7 is recorded for us by the prophet Malachi, for Malachi prophecies after this list has been assembled.

Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament, prophesies 5, 10, 15 years ahead of Nehemiah's time. Malachi shows us that when the people return to the land, a revival under Zerubbabel was only momentary. They began to lapse back into previous sin. They begin, for example, playing games with God. Bringing to God blind animals, diseased animals, crippled animals, and offering them in sacrifice. Finally, Malachi says, close the doors to the temple, don't let any more of these animals in.

There were unfaithful priests. Here were persons who were divorcing the wives of their youth in order to marry foreign women. Unfaithfulness to marital vows. Forsaking marital vows for adultery.

The people were back in the land in violence. There was lip service to the Lord. There was unfaithfulness in relationships, sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, defrauders of employees, defrauders of widows and orphans. That's about the worst kind of person you can imagine.

People who would gyp widows and orphans.

People who deprived aliens of justice. There was robbing of God by neglecting to tithe. Then on top of all of this there was blaming of God in Malachi 3:14 that God wasn't treating them better.

They were saying, "It's futile to serve God." These people had begun assuming some of the

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behavior patterns that had been present before the destruction. They had not really repented from the heart.

But God in His great love and grace gives them yet another chance. That will be the focus next week in Nehemiah 8, revival at the Water Gate.

The key verse in chapter 7 is “Now the city was large and spacious but there were few people in it and the houses had not yet been rebuilt” (verse 4). What’s the Lord wanting to do here through Nehemiah? Give his people yet another chance. The city I’ve given you to occupy is large. There are few people in it. I want you to fill it. That’s the whole purpose of getting the registration, the genealogy, to look at the descendants of the people that come out of this list and have them repopulate the town. In the palaces the Lord is building for us, in the city He is building, there is great room. It is God’s great heart of love and mercy that desires to populate His eternal city with His people. The mercy of God to people who have backslidden.

These exiles in Nehemiah 7 are descendants of people who had fallen astray from the Lord.

### **V. I want to close with a remarkable scriptural example of the longsuffering and great mercy of the Lord.**

Three centuries before Nehemiah is a remarkable scriptural example of the longsuffering and mercy of the Lord. If we go back three centuries before Nehemiah to the time when the whole nation first began to fall into captivity we find that as the Assyrians came down from the north and invaded Israel the first tribes that they took were Zebulun and Naphtali. Two tribes that lay on the northern border. The next century and a half was the century that gradually brought everyone into captivity. The prophet Isaiah who prophesies before the captivity began to take place says about the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, “Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of

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Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by way of the sea, along the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:1–2, NIV). Eight hundred years before the Lord, Isaiah is prophesying that the tribes that first went into captivity from that area will be the first to see the glory of the Lord. Sure enough in Matthew 4:13–16, “Leaving Nazareth, [Jesus] went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light’” (NIV).

The very place which was the first to be defeated is the first to see the glory of the Lord and see the Messiah come. And how like it is of God in our lives that in the very part of our lives where we experience defeat, where we let the enemy invade, where we begin to walk away from the Lord, in this very place the Lord In His great act of restoration brings back to us victory and revelation. God’s mercy, God’s grace, God’s love are reflected continually to us in every part of the Scripture, but I think especially in this little hidden part of the Scripture, Nehemiah 7, the record of exiles coming back, sons of backsliders, themselves backsliding in the land but God not giving up. God continuing to be faithful.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, this word today has been telling us that You don’t give up on us. That You seek again and again to reach us and care for us and to bring us back to Yourself as believers in You. And You never forget the moment when we first came to You and put our trust in You. It’s like bringing a baby in dedication and then watching that baby grow over the years—the sacredness, the beauty, the tenderness of that moment of the consecration of young life to God. It’s not forgotten. And

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You have not forgotten the first vows we spoke unto You. You have not forgotten that first endowment of the Spirit of God on our lives. It may be possible that we have forgotten. It may be possible that we have walked away. It may be possible that we have lost our first love. But You have not lost Your love for us. We bring our chastening upon ourselves. We bring our losses upon ourselves when we walk away from You. But when we walk back to You, You begin to restore us. You again put us in a place and get under way with the work of restoration. Lord, You sent this word today to our lives. Some You sent this word to because they are in the position of having turned away from You and they're not walking with You as before. You send this word to remind that person of both Your love and the consequences of continuing to walk away from You. You give us opportunities to come back to You and renew our vows to You. You give us this word also as warning. And You instruct us by it that the way of the transgressor is hard. But the way of the one who puts his trust in You, that way is easy and that burden is light. We thank You, Lord, that Your Word ever speaks to us and counsels us and I ask Your blessing upon us this day as we take these words to our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen.