

# Bristol Conference 1975-14 Nehemiah

by Stan Ford

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*Stan Ford's sermon on Nehemiah emphasizes the importance of restoring worship and confronting sin in our lives through immediate action and reverence for holy things.*

**Duration:** 39:40

**Scripture:** Leviticus 23:3, Nehemiah 10:31, Nehemiah 13:15-18, Acts 8:26-40

**Topics:** "Personal Responsibility", "Practical Christianity"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility and contribution to the fellowship of believers. He uses the analogy of selling fish, even though he admits to knowing nothing about it, to illustrate his point. The preacher also highlights the need for practical Christianity and the proper placement of Christ in the assembly. He references the story of Nehemiah and the desecration of holy things, urging the congregation to take action against sin and follow Nehemiah's example.

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## Transcript

Thank you. I think all of you are expecting me to say something after the remarks that Mr. Phillips made this morning. Well, I just want to heap coals of fire on his head.

I've enjoyed his ministry. Do you know if he carries on like that he'd be as good a preacher as his father was, really well. But I'm certain that every one of us in these past days has been challenged by his ministry and by the Bible readings that Mr. McKay has been leading, and I trust that God will continue to bless us in those days that are ahead.

Just a word of prayer. Dear Lord, we thank Thee for Thy Word, we thank Thee for that which Thou hast for us within its page, and we pray Thee that this evening as we draw to a close our consideration of this wonderful book of Nehemiah, may it please Thee to show us the things I would cannot know for Jesus' sake. Amen.

The last chapter of the book of Nehemiah, and verse 15 please. Verse 15 of the last chapter of the book of Nehemiah. In those days saw I and Judah some treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves and laden asses.

I've also wine, grapes, and pigs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals, said, well men of pyre also

therein which bought fish and all manner of ware, and sold on the Sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, what evil thing is this that ye do, and propane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers do? And did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? Yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by propaning the Sabbath.

And it came to pass that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the Sabbath. And some of my servants said I at the gate that there should no burden be brought in on the Sabbath day. So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice.

Then I testified against them, and said unto them, why lodge ye about the wall? If ye do so again I will lay hands on you, from that time forth. Came they no more on the Sabbath, and I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates that sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.

The Lord will add his blessing, I'm sure, to the reading of his word. I think you will understand that there is a sense in which I am sorry that we are having this evening to overlook so many chapters in this wonderful book. If I've done nothing more than whet your appetite, that when you go home you read it again, then I will feel that I have done a little of what the Lord wanted me to do.

But, we are going to the last chapter this evening, and as we look at it I'm going to suggest that there are a number of things to stand out for all of us to consider. There is, of course, in those past years that make 1 to 13 a tragic condition, and oh what a tragic condition it is. Nehemiah had set, as you will remember, a time when he would return to the palace of the king.

Would you excuse me, please? Nehemiah had set a time when he would return to the palace of the king, and when that time came round back he went, for he was a man whose honesty was seen by all. During the period that he had gone back to the palace of the king, those Jews that were left behind in Jerusalem, those that were surrounded with the walls, those indeed that were protected by the gates, those who had the word of God read in their ears by Ezra the high priest, very steadily forgot the covenant they had made with their God, and it seemed as though straight away they had turned the pathways that were just leading to God. Oh what a tragic condition.

But, when we come to verse 14, we find that Nehemiah has returned to Jerusalem, and he was the same Nehemiah, the same man that was seeking to serve God, and we find that that tragic condition came to a thorough cleansing, as Nehemiah throughout the whole household staff of Tiberias, as Nehemiah brought in the corn, and the oil, and the wine, and set up the very worship of God again. And then when we come, and it is in these verses I will be spending most of my time this evening, when we come to verse 15, through to the end of the chapter, it is not a tragic condition, it is not now a thorough cleansing, but praise God it is a thrilling conclusion, a thrilling conclusion, as we see Nehemiah dealing with sin, the sin of God's people, and setting before us a principle that if you and I will follow, we also will know something of victory over sin. I want to spend a moment or two, of course, in those first verses.

I want us to think of this tragic condition. Verse 5 opens with words like these, and he had prepared him a great chamber. This, of course, was the high priest, this was the man who should have known better, this was the man who would help build the wall right by the sheet gate.

And yet, the very high priest that prepared him a great chamber where aforetime, I want us to note those words, where aforetime there lay the meat offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of corn, new wine, and oil. Oh, what tragic conditions had come to God's people. Brethren, isn't it remarkable how easy it is for us to slip away, how easy it is for those who profess the name, the name of the Lord, to find themselves in advanced blinding conditions? And this is what Nehemiah found when he returned to Jerusalem.

Aforetime, there had been the meat offering. Now, if I would suggest anything to you, I would suggest this, that each one of us should search our own hearts. We should examine ourselves to see whether we are contributing to the assembly with which we are in fellowship, that which is for the glory of God.

Aforetime, there was the meat offering, and while I'm not going to take time to take you to the book of Leviticus and remind you of that meat, that meal offering, sufficient to say this, that if the meal offering bespeaks anything, it bespeaks Christ as the bread of life. It bespeaks this one who had lived a life in this scene completely for the glory of God. Why, we were thinking this morning of some of the wonders of the heart of the Father.

Isn't it grand also to think of the wonders of the heart of the Son? And if in our assembly Christ is not given his rightful place, if the meat, the meal offering, is not seen evidence of himself, if we have to say it was there aforetime, but it's not there now, let's go home to make sure that in our contribution we speak so to exhort Christ that men and women might know that he is a monster of a truth. Would you notice he said, where aforetime there was the meat, the meal offering, and where aforetime there was the frankincense? Oh again, need I remind you of those offerings? Need I remind you of that which spoke of praise, that which added indeed to the offering, that which was a sweet perfume into the very nostrils of Almighty God? And is it grand to know that in a local assembly it's possible to have Christ as the bread of life in our midst? Is it not wonderful to know also that Christ can receive from our service a fragrance which is for his glory and his blessing? Just as Christ's life was continually fragrant before the Father, so God's desire is that Christ may leave his life out to us, that we might have a fragrance for that our service which is for his glory. Is that so in our attending? Are we going back from this conference not just saying, wasn't the singing wonderful? Wasn't the ministry especially of Mr. Phillips and Mr. Morgan Grant? Or are we going back to say what we have learned we are going to teach, to put in practice that where we have come from as we go back we will be able to say that in the fellowship our ministry will be touched, that Christ is exalted as the bread of life, that our ministry will be touched, that Christ is ever presented as the fragrant one to the Father and that our service bears the fragrance of the Lord? Wherefore, time, there was the meat offering, the meal offering.

Wherefore, time, there was the fragrance, the frankincense. Wherefore, time, there were the vessels. Oh, it's not necessary for me to go very far now, is it? What was it the apostle said when writing the twelfth chapter of the epistles of the Romans? Wherefore, present your body a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God which is your intelligent worship.

Oh, if ever God has given to us a body, he has given it to us that it may be a vessel for his honor, for his glory. God grant that we may present in our fellowship an appreciation of Christ in our service, a fragrance of heaven, that we might in all our activity be able to say we are not conformed to this world. To use the words of Mr. Phillips's paraphrase, let not the world press you into its mold.

Be not conformed to this world, but that we might present our bodies to him. Wherefore, time, our time, our time, and what time? Time of corn, of wine, and of oil. Need I dare to spiritualize it? Need I dare remind you the corn speaks of two, the wine speaks of joy, the oil speaks of the spirit himself.

There are scores of scriptures that readily come to the minds of you Bible-loving Christians. Wherefore, time, these things were found. That Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, and instead of finding those, he found Tobiah living in sin, where these things were found upon him.

God grant that we may go back to make sure that there is that for our work, and witness, and worship, and for our watching, that we may go forward to be the men and women God would have us be. What a tragic condition when these things are not found. But is it wonderful that they haven't got to remain like that? Isn't it glorious that there can be a power cleansing? And Nehemiah went to this place where aforetime these things were found, and as I reminded you the other day, so I will spend little time there, he took the household stuff of Tobiah, and he threw it out.

He threw it out. Why? Instead of corn, instead of wine, instead of oil, there was a rocking chair, and a looking glass, and a bed, and he threw it out. Brethren, may I suggest that if amongst us there's time then, which is just pleasing to God, that he may give us the grace to be finished with it.

To be finished with it. To say, I'm going to be the man that God wants me to be, the woman God wants me to be, that the assembly with which I am connected may be that weeper, because I am there. Oh, don't let go from this place saying, if only brother so-and-so was different, how good the assembly would be.

Let's go from this place to say to ourselves, are we like Christ? What are we contributing for the good of our fellowship? A power cleansing, God give us, to cast out man which is displeasing to him. And now I've come to that that I wish to spend a little time in. In verse 15, right to the end, what I have called a thrilling conclusion.

Now I'm going to talk about something tonight I don't know anything about. Now preachers do that very often, very often. I don't know anything about selling fish.

I've never sold a fish in my life. I've tried to catch a few, and coming from the land of fish and chips, I've eaten a lot. But I don't know anything about selling fish.

But I want to talk with you again tonight about selling fish. I want us to think of those tremendous words in verse 15. In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the clavest, bringing in sheaves and lading asses, and also wine grapes and pigs, and all manner of birds.

And verse 16, and there dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which bought fish and all manner of wares, and sold them on the clavest unto the children of Judah and in Jerusalem. Now here was the man who came into Jerusalem selling fish. Now there's nothing wrong with selling fish.

I think it's a wonderful profession, not even a trade. I think it's a profession to sell good fish. I only know this, that while there's nothing wrong with selling fish, there's everything wrong with selling fish on the clavest.

Everything. Why, here were a people who had come and ended with God. Harken to the words as I read them of the thirty-first verse of the tenth chapter.

If the people of the land bring ware or victuals on the Sabbath day to sell, then we would not buy it of them. And the previous verses, verse 29, they had entered into an oath to walk in God's law. They had covenanted to keep God's law, but they permitted the men of Tyre to come and sell fish on the Sabbath.

Now, may I just draw one or two very simple lessons, please, please? Maybe you won't see them, but I do. May I draw one or two simple lessons about selling fish? The first lesson is this, there are some things you've got to do at once. Is that true? I think that's the first lesson about selling fish.

There are some things you've got to do at once, because please, there was no ice in those days, there were no deep freezers, there were no refrigerators, there are some things you've got to do at once. And I meet many a Christian who say, oh but Mr. Ford, this has got to be done, you know, it's got to be done. Well, that's true.

Of course, that's a lesson which as Christians we need to learn in our Christian service. What was it that the Bible said? Does it not tell us that the men of this generation are wiser than the men of light? Here were men who caught fish, they knew if they didn't sell them at once they'd stink. Now, that's rather crude, but that's how it is.

And so they said, we're going to sell them. The men of this generation, the men of this age, are wiser than the men of light. Brethren, have you never learned that there are some things you've got to do at once for God? You know, it's the old story, is it not, of Philip and the Ethiopian unit.

The Ethiopian unit was passing by in his carrier, and the spirit said to Philip, run, join thyself to the chariot. I say, Philip had learned that there were some things you've got to do at once. Have you ever stopped to consider, just for a few moments, what would have happened if Philip had not done what God told him to do at once? The chariot would have been further away, wouldn't it? He would have had to run further.

It would have been harder for him to get there. If he was a bit like me, by the time he'd have got there, he'd have been out of breath. Ah, but more important than that, listen, if he'd have put off for one minute doing what the Spirit of God told him to do, by the time he had got to the chariot, the Ethiopian unit would have been out of the 53rd chapter, wouldn't he? Into the 54th.

And I want to tell you something. I want to tell you there's not a man or a woman here tonight who's ever heard a gospel sermon on the 54th of Isaiah. You've had a lesson on the 53rd.

It's the easiest verse in the Bible to teach the gospel from, the easiest chapter in the Bible, and God knew it. So he said to Philip, Philip, hear me in a nice easy text. There'll be no hard questions.

Philip, run. And he did what God told him at once, and he came to the easiest chapter in the Bible to preach from. I wouldn't like to preach the gospel from the 54th, would you? Not me, but I'll preach it from the 53rd.

Brethren, sisters, let's grasp it that the men of Tyre knew that there were some things they had to do at once, and so they went and sold their fish. But there's something else in the story. It not only tells me there are some things that I must do at once, but it tells me there are some things that I dare not desecrate.

May I repeat that? There are some things I dare not desecrate. Rather the fish went bad than desecrate the Sabbath. God had given this to his people.

We're in Old Testament times, not New Testament times. Please, I am not a Sabbath keeper, but I trust I'm a Lord's Day keeper. I trust I believe that the first day of the week, that day of buried fears and risen hopes, that golden clasp to a new week, I trust that I reverence it as the Lord's Day.

But there they were under law, and so it was so much firmer, was it not? They had to learn there are some things you can't afford to desecrate. Brethren, haven't we learned that? May I ask you, what are the things that we must not desecrate? We dare not. If we do, then we will reap what we have sowed.

Could I suggest this, that there's not one of us here today who dare, who dare desecrate our family life? We are living in a day when there are holy things, and God gave you and I the holy family. And I believe that every one of us must do our best to keep our family as a family. May I speak to you teenage young folks, may I? Are you listening now? Can I talk to you like an old uncle? You see, I'm no longer a boy.

Why? My wife from the south has been married 35 years, and we've children older than you, with their own children. So let me talk to you like an old uncle. Let me say this, that I believe it's important that mum and dad shall do their best to keep the family together.

But I believe you teenagers have a responsibility as well. I believe on your shoulders rests the responsibility of not desecrating family life. For a church, a nation, a world is built for the glory of God on that.

I believe it's most essential. I believe we dare not desecrate our bodies. I believe God gave us a body, and we must care for it.

We must look after it. I believe it's important these things, as we were considering the past week when we realised the words of Paul to young Timothy were true. When he reminded him that bodily exercise profit us, but God did it for all time.

Bodily exercise profit us, not little as our authorised version says, but for a little while, for a little while. And I believe we need to care for our bodies. They're the temples of the Holy Ghost.

God gave us not to desecrate. But I have little doubt that there are some of us here tonight saying, but you know Mr Preacher, you know sin came again to Jerusalem. They did desecrate holy things.

What are we going to do about it? And that's why I said that I wanted to talk this evening about conquering sin. And I want you to know three things that Nehemiah did. And I want you to remember them, please, please remember them.

I do not apologise for the order in which I'm going to give you them, because I didn't write the Bible. Not guilty, not guilty. God gave us the order, and this is God's order in the 13th of Nehemiah.

And brethren, don't come to me afterwards and say, you know Mr Ford, I don't know whether that's right. You go on your knees and you tell God that Nehemiah led you astray, don't you? And I would better see how you wait till you get to glory and tell Nehemiah about it. But this is God's word.

I suggest to you, the first thing that Nehemiah did to conquer sin in Jerusalem, are you listening to that? The first thing he did was the secular thing. The next thing he did was the strong thing. And the last thing he did was the spiritual thing.

Oh, I know what some of you, I can almost see it in your faces. You're sitting there and you're saying, Mr Ford, surely spiritual thing first. Surely.

I didn't write it. I didn't write it. First, he did the secular thing.

Then the strong thing, and lastly the spiritual thing. Do you want to conquer sin in your life? I believe this is God's principle. First he did the secular thing.

Do you remember what we read? Why he found these men who came down to sell fish on the Sabbath. And verse 17 says, Then I contended with the nobles of Judah and said unto them, What evil thing is this that you do and profane the Sabbath day? Did not your father trust? And did not our God bring all this evil upon us and upon this city? Yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the Sabbath. And it came to pass that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath, are you listening? I commanded that the gates should be shut.

Now that's the first thing. Listen, if you don't want men to come into Jerusalem and sell fish, I tell you the best thing you can do is shut the gate in their face. Keep them out.

I say, no good kneeling down and saying, Dear Lord, these wicked men of Tyre, they're coming to sell fish on the Sabbath. Lord, Lord, keep them away. God will say, Go and shut the gate yourself.

I say, Brother, could I ask you something? Sister, could I ask you something? Are you shutting the gate? Are you? I have a very dear, dear friend away in the Buckinghead district of the Murphyside. He's a shipwright, a boilermaker. During war, when the shipyards of the Murphyside were mapping out boats as hard as ever they could, he had to work all day and long into the hours of the night, desperate overtime.

But he trusted the Lord. And when God saved him, God saved him from being a drunkard, a real drunkard. And I've heard him say many a time, he said, You know, when God saved me from drink, he never took the taste away, never took the taste away.

He'd given me power to overcome it, but he never took the taste away. And thirty-eight years after, he still has a desire for a drink. He never touches it.

And he'd go on his way home, dead tired, and desperately thirsty after working in the boilers. He'd pass so many pubs, so many liquor bars, as you call them, and every one he'd pass, he'd get a snap. And it was a matter of peddling on his bike as hard as he could, until one day he said to himself, I know, I know, if I come out a couple of layers from the main entrance, and instead of going up towards Buckinghead, I go down the Chester Road a little way, and then up over the hill, and round it over, it'll mean an extra two miles after a hard day's work.

But if I go that way, I don't pass a pub. And if I don't pass a pub, I don't get the smell. And if I don't get the smell, I won't have the desire.

And if I don't have the desire, I won't drink. He shut the gate. Brothers and sisters, when we examine our life, dare I suggest this, if we have a possessing sin, I suggest this to us, that we know our weak point.

And I believe when a possessing sin comes upon a Christian, it's because he's left the gate open. If you're troubled with immoral thoughts, I tell you what you mustn't do, you mustn't go into some of these bookstores and buy some of those yellowback novels. You mustn't allow your eyes to gaze on some of

that literature that seems indeed to mar so many bookshelves and stores in your country.

You've got to shut the gate. Now please, God won't stop you doing it. If you want to go and look at the pulp that's on the bookstore, you can do it.

God's given you a free will, you can do it. But if you do it, you'll open the floodgates of temptation. If you drink, you mustn't go into a liquor bar and say please I'll just have a coke, because you'll get the smell of something stronger.

If you, oh I needn't go any further, need I? Need I? Brethren, the tragedy today, as there are so many Christians who leave the gate open, and God won't shut the gate for us. We've got to shut the gate. He went down, He did the secular thing, He did what He could do, He shut the gate.

Verse 21, that love, oh I love this, this is a hallelujah. Then I testified against them, and said unto them, why lodge ye about the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you. Well, I say, that's the kind of Christianity that we don't hear much about, isn't that true? I wonder why it is that people imagine that when you're a Christian, you've got, oh you must pardon me, you must pardon me, for you've got to be some sort of city.

Listen friends, one of the things that kept me, even from considering the things of God, before I would say, was the fact I used to think that all those Christians were the sort of folk, well you sneeze, as I said the other day, and they catch a cold and die of pneumonia, poor folk. You know what's needed today? We need a bit of old-fashioned bedclothes, the courage not only to shut the gate, but to see the men of tired hands, and they stood by the gate, they saw the gate was shut, they said we can't get in. Oh, I know what we'll do, they lodged outside the gate once or twice.

They said to the men through the bars, excuse me, would you like to buy some fish? Good. No, they didn't sell for many, but they sold some, and by the way, that brings me to another point, and an important point. Don't you forget the men of fire would never have come to sell fish on the server, if there was no one to buy.

I'll say no more than that. I only know this, I only know this, that many a Christian opens himself to temptation, when he should never, never be in the place where temptation could be found. But here Nehemiah does the strong thing, he says if you do so again I'll lay my hands on you.

God give us the courage to stand up, stand up for Jesus, he's soldiers of the cross. And let me tell you something, my sister, there's no need for you to support women's lives, because God's got you in his army, while some of your women are fighting to get in the army, he's got you there already. Praise God, there's a work for you to do, as soldiers of the cross.

But when he had done the secular thing, and when he had done the strong thing, then he did the spiritual thing. It's like I said the other evening, and I'd like to repeat it, I often feel in a prayer meeting when I hear some brethren pray, I often feel like the Lord would say to us, why don't you go and do it yourself. You know we ask the Lord to do so many things we can do ourselves.

God give us the tap the door, God give us a bit strong, but God give us to realize it, that when we've done what we can do, it's still not enough. But he called indeed for the Levites, he said cleanse yourself, and you set the watch. I can't be watching all the time, you set a watch.

And I need not remind you, need I, that Levites speak indeed of the spirit of God himself. These Levites that according to the sixteenth of numbers were people that were near the Lord, were people chosen that they might indeed serve God. I think of he the Holy Spirit whose work it is to serve Christ, to present Christ to us, to teach us the things of Christ.

I thank God that I could bow my knee and say, Lord, I've shut the gate. I know it's my fault to be strong in my Christian testament, but all that I've done is nothing. Wilt thou come in the power of thy spirit and set the watch over my life? And is it grand? We read the men of Tyre, they went away.

And is it wonderful? It wasn't just one thing in the life of Nehemiah. Well, let's go on to the last verses of this wonderful book, the last verses of this wonderful book. And we find indeed Nehemiah doing almost the same thing.

Verse 28, and the closing phrase, therefore, you listen, therefore I chase him from me. Oh, he's still at it, is he? Still at it. He's chasing Tobiah, he's chasing the son-in-law of Eliasheth the high priest.

Why? He's chasing Pambalic, he's chasing away. James has an interesting word, doesn't he? Resist the devil. What does it say? He'll flee from me.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that the weakest believer, when yielding his life to Christ, is stronger than the evil one? Well, that's what James says. Resist the devil, and he'll flee from you. Oh, what a pretty conclusion.

As we see, Satan resting his head amongst the people of God, although they've been redeemed and blasted and the walls have been built and the gates have been hung, but there's an answer to it. May we be strong, may we shut our gates, and may we bow our knee and commit our life to the one who alone can heal. Oh God grant that we may know something of victory over Satan, for his name's name is Christ.

Amen. Shall we close in prayer? Dear Lord, grant that we may learn the lessons of practical Christianity. Deliver us from being so heavy.

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