

How to Backslide

Light in the Shadows — Week 4
Nehemiah 13

Introduction

I was thinking this week about all the cool hobbies people have. Some of you can restore cars, build stuff, all kinds of things. You might not know this, but one of my favorite hobbies is gardening. When we moved into our house a number of years ago, one of the first projects we did was put in a garden. I find a garden to be incredibly therapeutic.

If you come to our house, in our garden we've got raspberries and blackberries. We've got a big cherry tree, but I never seem to get the cherries because the birds beat me to it every single year. We've got cucumbers and squash, and we try to grow some pumpkins. But the prize of my garden is my salsa beds — tomatoes, jalapeños, peppers, onions. By the time we get to August, we make the best pico de gallo you've ever had. I eat it by the gallon. I love my garden.

But a little confession here. At the start of every season, it goes really well. You get everything planted, the watering just right, and it looks amazing. But then as the summer goes on, you get a little busier. There might be a few days you don't go check the garden. And finally, after a week or so, you go out and think, where did all these weeds come from? Now there's crab grass growing everywhere. Why aren't my pumpkins getting water? Those things were supposed to water automatically, and they're all dry. What happened here?

I think weeds are like a part of the fall of man. Satan shows up in weeds, because they just keep showing up time after time. Nobody wants their garden taken over by weeds. But if you miss a few days, you come back and everything is out of control, and you're like, what happened?

Entropy

Scientists have an answer for what happened. They call it the law of entropy. What that law means is if something is left alone — anything in the universe — it doesn't move from chaos to order. It moves from order to disorder. If you leave something alone, it's going to move into chaos.

Think about this — we're in camping season. You light your fire. What happens to the fire left alone? It goes out. You have to keep putting energy into the fire. You have to keep putting fuel in it. You have to remove the ashes, stir it, to keep it going. That's the

law of entropy. If you aren't putting energy into it, it moves toward chaos. And the opposite is true — things don't naturally move from disorder to order.

I was thinking the best way to explain that would be a parent walking past their child's room. Holy moly, what happened to that bedroom? It's a disaster. We're so thankful we have doors so we can hide all that stuff. But that room is not going to get clean on its own. It's going to take energy — probably your child's energy — to get in there and turn it into order.

Whether it's a garden or our life, when it's left alone, it doesn't drift toward order. It drifts toward chaos and disorder every single time.

I experienced this in my own life. I had the privilege of working at Madison House Youth Center for eight years, and I loved my time there. One of the things I loved is we had all these kids around, and I was always playing games and sports and chasing kids around. So I had all my energy used up — I was in shape because I was chasing kids all the time.

Then around 2012, we left to pursue this dream of planting Restoration Church, and it shifted. Instead of chasing kids around, I began working in an office, spending all my time writing vision plans, trying to figure out what a launch team looks like, trying to write bylaws and a statement of faith and sermons. I was a lot less active.

A couple months after we left Madison House, some kids called me up: "Kevin, come play soccer." So I show up to play soccer with these kids, and they're looking at me like, what happened to you? Why is your shirt so small? And I look down, and there's this pouch in front of me. How did I get here? It's the law of entropy. Left on its own, our lives will move toward chaos and disorder.

The same idea applies to our faith. In our faith, we could call it spiritual entropy — where if we are not intentionally investing in our faith, our faith and our life will move toward disorder. In Christianity, we actually have a term for this. It's called backsliding.

This is when someone comes to Christ, puts their faith in Jesus, and gets excited — I'm on fire for Jesus, I want to follow him, I want to serve him, I want to do all these things. But over time that fire begins to fade, and without effort, we fall into this thing called a backslide. The New Testament has other terms for it. It calls it falling away. James, the brother of Jesus, calls it wandering from the truth.

The whole idea I want us to grasp is this: sometimes we look at our life, our faith, our garden, and we think, how did I get here? How did I end up where I am now? That's the question we're going to wrestle with this morning.

We're in a series called Light in the Shadows. The heart of this series is relevant to our day and culture. It would almost seem easier for God to remove us Christians from all this craziness and put us somewhere easier to live out our faith. But this series is saying: God, help us understand that you called us to be light in the darkness. God hasn't called us to remove us from the dark places of the world — he's called us to be a faithful, joyful presence in the midst of those dark places.

Over the last three weeks, we focused on this bigger vision of how God has called us to these places. We saw from John 17 where Jesus prayed for us as Christians, and he didn't pray that we would be removed and spared from the dark world — he prayed that we would be sent on mission into it. Then we saw the story where Jesus doesn't call us to build safe tables that are comfortable and easy — he calls us to build Jesus tables, where we invite the world in. And last week, in Daniel chapter 1, we saw that being different in Babylon — being light in the darkness — is what makes all the difference. If we want to make a difference in our community and the world, it's by choosing to be different in Babylon.

Today, though, we're shifting from the why and the vision to the how. If God calls us to be present in the dark world around us, one of the objections we have is fear — the fear that if we get too close to the world, we'll compromise our faith and assimilate into the culture around us. We're set to be different, set apart. But if we're too close to the world, the fear is we'll just assimilate, and there'll be no difference between Christians and non-Christians.

This is the law of entropy. This is backsliding. It's a legitimate fear. But fortunately, we're going to look at a case study today. Nehemiah chapter 13 is a story of God's people experiencing this exact thing. They're backsliding — I'll use the term assimilating. They're compromising their faith to become just like the culture around them.

Normally when I preach the Bible, I'm telling you what you should do, not what you shouldn't do. But today we're doing something different. We're going to title this message "How to Backslide." Because Nehemiah 13 gives us a pattern — this is what it looks like to fall into backsliding, into assimilating into the culture around us. And hopefully, as we study this, we'll learn what we need to do to not fall into the same trap.

Nehemiah 13 Context

So, Nehemiah chapter 13 — a little context. You know the story of Nehemiah. He was the governor sent to Jerusalem for thirteen years. They're rebuilding the wall, rebuilding the city, reestablishing the Israelites as the people of God. In chapters 8 and 9, you see this beautiful moment where the people of God recommit themselves to the things of God — "we're going to honor you, we're going to live for you, we're going to publicly say we're following you." And you get to that point in the story and everything is really good. God is doing remarkable things.

But we get to Nehemiah 13, and the context is this: the king had given Nehemiah permission to go rebuild the walls, but Nehemiah had a job — he was the king's cup bearer. So once the walls are rebuilt and everything's established, the king says, Nehemiah, you've got to come back home. So Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem and goes back to Persia. The text doesn't say how long — maybe a year or two.

After this time, in Nehemiah 13, Nehemiah comes back into the city, and what he finds is the people have completely backslidden. They've assimilated into the culture around them. And he's going to confront the people on three specific ways he sees them backsliding.

1. Misaligned Priorities

Nehemiah comes back into the city and notices something's off. Verse 15 says he saw in Judah that people were treading wine presses on the Sabbath, bringing in heaps of grain, loading them on donkeys, along with wine and grapes and figs and all kinds of loads — bringing them to sell in the market on the Sabbath. The issue is that God had established the Sabbath as a day specifically set apart to be different — a day to remember the Lord.

Now, here's the thing. These people going to the market on the Sabbath, selling things, working their fields — I don't think any of them were saying, "forget the Sabbath, it doesn't matter." They're God's people. They understand it's important. No one is saying, let's forget worshiping God, let's forget gathering with his people, let's forget the gift of the day of rest.

No one says that. I imagine these people were thinking more like, "just this week." The grapes are ripe, there are all these people in town, this is a perfect opportunity — we'll bring our stuff, set up the market. It was just convenient. Just one day. Just one Sabbath. It's not going to hurt anybody.

And they did it. And guess what — nothing bad happened. Oh, the world didn't fall apart because we didn't honor the Sabbath? So what happens? They do it again. One reasonable exception at a time. Just like the law of entropy. These people, almost without realizing it, had their priorities become misaligned — where the secular became more important than the spiritual, and the profit became more important than the purpose.

I don't think they actually chose, "we think the secular is more important than the spiritual." But don't we know how this goes? Summer hits — the weather's nice, kids are off school, we've got to take advantage of the time, the lake, the outdoors. We'll get back to church in the fall, when things slow down. Then fall hits — it's hunting season, we've got to get that deer. We'll get back to church in the winter. Then winter gets here, and it's so cold in the morning, it's nice to stay bundled up, and we'll get back to church on Easter.

It's the law of entropy. Or think about this — you get a new job. Great opportunity for your family, going to set them up for a long time. You don't think about how the schedule gets a little more chaotic, how the kids and their activities pile up, how everybody gets busier and busier. And pretty soon you've lost that dinner table routine — where you sit around the table, actually talk to your family, ask how things are going, have a conversation about what God's doing.

And then there's the bedtime routine with your kids — the Bible stories, praying together at night. You get to the end of the day and you're just too tired. You want to go sit on the couch and watch a show. And we say, it's just a season. It's just a season.

We don't decide to quit all these things together. It's just one logical excuse after another. This is the law of entropy kicking in — when we think, it's just one little thing, it's not that big of a deal. If we're not intentional about our faith, we'll find ourselves backsliding. We'll find ourselves assimilating into the culture around us — prioritizing the secular over the spiritual, profit over purpose.

Nehemiah sees this among the people and thinks, this is not good. And I love the response Nehemiah comes up with. Verse 19 says at night Nehemiah commands the gates to be closed into the city, and kept closed until after the Sabbath is over. He puts guards at the gates so no business can come into the city.

But some of the merchants get a little smarter — they start camping outside the city and jumping over the wall, because there are all these people who need a place to eat after church, and they want to make sure people come to their place. And I love verse 21 — Nehemiah warns them: if you do so again, I will lay hands on you.

Isn't that great? Nehemiah, you're such a bad guy. But Nehemiah doesn't just complain about the people drifting, backsliding, assimilating into the culture around them — he actually builds a structure to stop it. Because here's the reality: our good intentions don't hold our feet to the fire. Our good intentions don't hold lines. Gates do. Boundaries help enforce faithfulness to the things of God. This is all about intentionality. We're going to be intentional to build boundaries in place so that the spiritual becomes the center, not the secular — so purpose becomes the focus, not profit.

Number one, they backslid because of misaligned priorities. But once we start asking, where have we slipped in our calendar and our bank account — the next question gets a little more uncomfortable, because it's not just about schedule or money.

2. Mismanaged Families

Nehemiah is walking around the city and sees something else. Verse 23 — he saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. I want to be clear: this isn't about ethnicity — it's about worship. These women worshiped false gods, other things instead of the one true God. And notice — this isn't dramatic. It wasn't called a crisis in the moment. But as these men married these women from other places with

other false gods, the foundation of their family, the center of gravity that drove their family, began to change. God was no longer the center of their family — now false gods were introduced into the mix.

The culmination of this — verse 24 — says half the children spoke the language of Ashdod and could not speak the language of Judah. What is the language of Judah? Hebrew — the language of the Torah. The Bible they had at that point — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the Psalms — was all in the language of Judah. When they worshiped in the synagogue or temple, it was in the language of Judah. When Ezra and the priests taught about God, it was in the language of Judah.

Notice, the text doesn't say they preferred another language but spoke a little Hebrew at church. It says they could not speak it or understand it at all. What does that look like for us? I think it looks like this: we've got kids who can tell us all about the sports stats — how great their favorite team is, all the stats, what next season looks like. We've got kids who know all of Taylor Swift's songs and can tell you all about the latest concert. We've got kids who can rattle off everything they've learned in English class, science, history.

But then you ask those kids to pray out loud, and they freeze. You ask them to tell you the gospel, and they say, I've never done that, I don't know how. Not because they're not smart, but because that wasn't the language spoken in their home.

In our homes, we talk about all sorts of stuff — sports, movies, education, music, politics, technology. But are we speaking the language of God? The language of the Bible? The language of the gospel? Because if those things aren't a regular presence in our home, our kids won't know it. They'll be able to talk about politics and sports and Taylor Swift, but they'll miss the things that matter most.

I don't think any of these parents sat down and decided, "I don't want to teach my kids how to pray, I don't want them to know the language at all." No parent decides that. It happens through a thousand smaller choices, where the things of God get squeezed out by the things of this world.

I told you I loved Nehemiah's response to the first point. His response to this one is even better. Verse 25 — Nehemiah says, "I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair."

Who's going to go to that church? That's a pastoral beatdown. Okay, not exactly — I'm not promoting that. This wasn't Nehemiah losing his temper. In those days, this was cultural shaming. Think back a generation — when you mouthed off to the teacher, they took the ruler. This was public shaming — saying, what you're doing is wrong, and I want you and everyone else to see it. This is a big deal. We can't allow this to happen.

Then verse 26, Nehemiah reminds them about Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, who was also pulled off course the same way — by marrying foreign women who brought their different gods into the home and took God out of the center.

Backsliding: number one, it starts with misaligned priorities. Number two, it happens when we mismanage our families. But it moves beyond that — past our homes, to the people closest to us.

3. Misplaced Access

Verse 28 — one of the sons of Jehoiada, son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. And — I love this — "therefore I chased him away."

We read this and think, what's going on here, what's the big deal about a marriage? When Nehemiah went to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, there were two enemies you read about through the entire book — two people constantly fighting against Nehemiah and the people of God. One of them was Sanballat — a guy who mocked the people of God, threatened them, tried everything he could to stop them from rebuilding the walls and the temple.

And here, this enemy of the people of God has a daughter who married into the high priest's family. Talk about access. Talk about influence. In fact, back in verses 4 and 5, Eliashib the high priest was in charge of the storerooms of the temple. There was a relative of Tobiah, and Eliashib prepared a large room used for temple storage and gave it to Tobiah.

So we've got Sanballat, an enemy, and Tobiah, an enemy — and the high priest says, hey, we've got this big empty storage room in the temple, the place where God is worshiped — why don't you come live in it? That would be like us having a known enemy of the church move into our storage room and just live there, and it being fine.

This series has been all about God calling us to intentionally pursue relationships and influence in a lost, broken world. That's the mission. But we've got to make sure we're actually staying faithful to God in the process.

Here's the deal — the people closest to you, the ones you go to for influence, for advice on the major matters of your life, those need to be people who are walking with God. The problem in Nehemiah 13 wasn't that the people of God were living near the broken world. The problem was they were giving the broken world access and influence they never should have had.

What does that look like for us? A friend starts mentoring you at work. He's a Christian, good at his job, patient, a nice guy. Nothing wrong with that at first. But time goes on, and the friendship shifts — his influence starts to shape other parts of your life. He becomes your go-to for advice. Now, being helpful at work is one thing. But if his worldview on money, on marriage, on priorities is off, and you're treating that as authoritative for parts of your life way beyond work — that's the problem. It's not that he's a bad guy. It's that you've given him access and influence over the deep parts of your life he was never meant to have.

So here's the question: who's around you? Who has more influence in your life than they should? Because that's really the question underneath everything we've talked about today. It's not about how close you are to the world. It's about what you allow to sit closest to your soul.

Here's the summary of everything we've seen this morning: assimilation was never really about proximity to the world. It's about who — and what — you allow to shape you.

The Big Idea: A Life in Orbit

Now, you might expect a message like this to end with, "go realign your priorities." But here's the problem — priorities shift with the seasons of your life. What's urgent to you at 25 is not what's urgent to you at 45 or 65. So we need a different picture than just a list of priorities.

Here's the picture I want to leave you with. Picture your life as a solar system. Everything orbits something. In our solar system, the planets orbit the sun. So here's the question — what's sitting at the center of your life? What's the sun of your solar system?

God is supposed to be the sun. He's supposed to be the center. And everything else — your job, your marriage, your kids, your hobbies, your friendships — those are supposed to be the planets. They orbit around God.

When Nehemiah walked back into Jerusalem, what he discovered is that the people's solar system had gotten rearranged. The wrong thing had been put at the center. And that's why they fell into backsliding, into assimilating — and it's the same reason we do. Slowly, over time, we replace God with ourselves at the center. Job revolves around me. Family revolves around me. Marriage, money — it all revolves around me. And sometimes we model this for our homes and our families. We give the wrong people influence. We affirm the wrong thing sitting at the center of our solar system.

So let me give you three things to walk away with this morning.

1. Relocate Your Center of Gravity

Remember, Nehemiah didn't just complain about the Sabbath drift, about the misaligned priorities. He shut the gate. He built a structure to protect what mattered most, because good intentions don't hold the line.

Here's your assignment. Open up your calendar. Open up your banking app. Look at it honestly and ask — what's actually sitting at the center of my life? Is it work? Is it my kids' schedule? Is it my phone? Social media? A hobby? Now listen — those things aren't evil. The danger is that they make excellent moons and terrible suns. So pick a specific rhythm this week — pray or read your Bible before you touch your phone,

protect a Sabbath rest, make church a priority — something that relocates your orbit back around God.

2. Show Them the Sun Is Worth Orbiting

Remember those kids in Nehemiah 13 who lost the language of their own faith? They didn't lose it on their own. They lost it because nobody showed them that God was worth orbiting.

Faith isn't just taught — it's caught. If your center of gravity is off — if it's your career, your hobbies, your achievements sitting at the center — your family is going to inherit that same off-center gravity. So make gospel conversation a normal, regular part of your rhythm. Pray with your kids. Ask them to pray. Make Jesus a regular part of the conversation in your home.

And here's why God is actually worth orbiting — and it's not because of a rulebook. It's because of the gospel. While we were still orbiting ourselves — still stuck in our own chaos, our own mess — God stepped in. He took on flesh. He lived the life we couldn't live. He died the death we deserved. And he did it while we were still orbiting ourselves. God didn't just demand our gravity. He rearranged the entire universe to come to us. That's what makes him worth orbiting.

3. Weigh Who's Pulling You

In a solar system, mass determines gravity. Whatever has the greatest mass bends everything else around it. Eliashib the priest made the decision to betray everything holy. He let Tobiah's presence, Sanballat's influence, carry more weight in his life than they ever should have.

So ask yourself — who's around you? Who has the most mass in your life? Who influences your relationships, your money, your values? Is their life orbiting God at the center? Are they helping you orbit God — or are they pulling you off course?

For some of you, this is going to mean shifting some close relationships. It might mean it's time to get more connected here at Restoration — a group, a new relationship with people you can actually rely on, who will support you, encourage you, and help keep God at the center of your life. We all need that. Every single one of us.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, made the point that the road to ruin is rarely a dramatic plunge — it's a gradual, gentle slope, with no sudden turns and no warning signs along the way.

I don't think any Christian wakes up and chooses to backslide, to compromise, to assimilate into the culture around them. It's just a few small decisions at a time. The slope is so gentle, you don't even feel yourself descending.

So here's what I want for you and for me — a life in orbit around God. Because that's what it means to be light in the shadows. And that's what changes a city. That's what changes a world.