



SHARING SCRIPTURE

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Backslidden People

For use: Dec. 8 - 14

Texts: Nehemiah 13:1-9; Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Nehemiah 13:10-14; Numbers 18:21-24; Nehemiah 13:15-22; John 5:5-16

Sears used to be the king of Christmas retailers with its annual Wish Book and extensive mail-order network. For over a century, Sears occupied the same position as current online giant Amazon, but it has now faded into retail irrelevancy, limping through the holiday shopping season. The stores are often grungy and understaffed, with many bare shelves. Several vendors refuse to supply the store because of non-payment for their services. When hedge fund billionaire Eddie Lampert took over the bankrupt company he planned to save 425 stores. The chain is now down to about 128 stores. The next year will tell if Lampert is able to pull Sears out of its death spiral. [1]

It's a cautionary tale of what can become of mighty franchises and people who lose their way.

Nehemiah returned from a trip to Babylon to find an alarming situation in Judaea. The people had quickly forgotten the lessons of their past history and returned to the behaviors that caused the destruction of their nation. Ezra and Nehemiah led Israel through the initial steps toward reestablishing their former glory. They needed to return to God, so they promised three things: they would stop intermarrying with idolators, they would observe the Sabbath and they would again provide for the temple services through tithes and offerings. In the short time that Nehemiah was gone they broke all three promises.

This rapidly became a recipe for disaster. Eliashib, one of the leaders that Nehemiah left in charge, formed an alliance with Tobiah, the Ammonite who tried to prevent the restoration of Jerusalem. Nehemiah discovered several Ammonites and Moabites in positions of leadership. The Levites responsible for providing the temple services had to return to work in the fields to support themselves as the people neglected to return their tithes and offerings. Sabbath observance became non-existent as the people worked, bought and sold goods on the seventh day, just like every other day of the week.

Nehemiah recognized that he needed to take emergency measures to stem the tide of apostasy and save the fledgling nation from ruin. Some of his drastic actions can seem overbearing to us today, but Nehemiah had experienced the tragic results of turning from God and he did not want to see that happen to Israel again.

For Reflection

Connecting: Sketch on a piece of drawing paper an illustration of the most memorable form of punishment from your schooldays. Show your sketches to each other and tell a bit about the experience. What did you learn from this punishment?

Sharing: What image comes to your mind when you hear the term “backslidden people”?

1. These are people who have gradually let the devil steal their joy and assurance in Christ
2. They probably weren't well-grounded in their faith to begin with, so they are like the seeds that fell on shallow soil in Jesus' parable
3. Backsliders are people who decided that living lives of sin is much more fun than leading Christian lives
4. I think of some of my loved ones whom I pray will return to a saving relationship with Jesus
5. It is an arrogant, judgmental term
6. Other:

Applying: Does your church have an active, effective ministry to reconnect with your missing members? Brainstorm some ideas that your group can implement to reach out to these members of your church family. Choose one thing that you can reasonably do soon. Plan to add more activities as you are able.

Valuing: Have you ever thought about leaving your church family? What keeps you connected with them? If you feel safe enough to do so, share what you are thinking or feeling with one other person in your group and ask that person to pray with you right then, and also put you in touch with a pastor or elder who can help you work through your struggles.

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Three decades ago, we created this resource for small groups and Sabbath school classes, and it continues to bless so many people worldwide. Thank you for your continued interest in these biblical themes and what they mean to your life and those people with whom you share it.

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