

The book of Nehemiah

or

“Construction and combat”

by Rick Shoemaker

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Key verses

Ne 1:3 And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

Ne 1:11 O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.

Ne 6:15 So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The book of Nehemiah, one of the historical books of the Bible, continues the story of the Jews return from the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. This book could be viewed as a continuation of the book of Ezra.

Spiritually, it's message is meant to stir the hearts of believers and encourage them to give their all to God and His purpose in their lives.

A wall was a vital part of cities in ancient times.

The wall around Jerusalem was meant to protect. The wall was high and wide enough to keep most enemies from attacking.

The wall around Jerusalem was meant to prevent. The wall prevented those who might bring in beliefs or behavior contrary to God's will and Word.

The wall around Jerusalem was meant to provide. Businesses would often build close to the wall of the city.

The wall around Jerusalem was meant to prove. A wall, like a well-kept house and lawn, gave proof to the care of the owner. God loved the city of Jerusalem and wanted it to show forth His care for mankind.

THE PEOPLE OF THIS BOOK

The kings of Persia

Two Persian kings played major parts in the lives of the Jews.

Cyrus, the king of Persia during Ezra's day, had given permission to the Jews to leave Babylon and return to the land of Judah.

Artaxerxes, the king of Persia during Nehemiah's day, was instrumental in helping the Jews rebuild of the wall surrounding Jerusalem.

The people of Judah (Jews)

At the time of the writing of this book, the nation of Israel had been divided. The ten northern tribes were known as "Israel," and the two southern tribes were known as "Judah".

Their sin had caused God to judge both, Israel and Judah.

In 722 B.C., the Assyrians attacked and deported the 10 northern tribes (Israel), scattering them throughout the known world. This deporting caused what is often referred to as the ten lost tribes of Israel. These tribes may have been lost to man, but they were not lost to God.

Later, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians overthrew the two southern tribes (Judah). They attacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and took many of the Jews into captivity, where they stayed for 70 years (2 Kg. 25:8-12). Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were a part of this group. Daniel recorded this event (Dan. 1:1-7).

During these 70 years of captivity, the world empire control changed from the Babylonians to the Persians. Daniel recorded this takeover (Dan. 5:22-28).

It is interesting that after the Babylonian Captivity, the terms "Jew", "Israel", and "Judah" are used interchangeably. Nehemiah called them "Jews" (1:2), "Israel" (1:6), and "Judah" (1:2).

Nehemiah

Nehemiah was the cupbearer of the King of Persia (1:11). Being a cupbearer was a position of honor but also of danger. It was an honor because the king put his complete trust in his cupbearer. A cupbearer was more than a servant, he was a friend to the king. However, being a cupbearer was very dangerous. He would taste the food and drink meant for the king to make sure it was safe. Any poison meant for the king will kill the cupbearer instead.

Nehemiah was a layman, not a priest or prophet. He is a perfect example of how God can, and will, use the ordinary person to do unordinary things. One person can have a significant impact on their world when they are surrendered wholly to God (Col. 3:17).

Nehemiah, being a man who loved God, was grieved about the spiritual condition of the Jews (1:4).

His name means "consolation of Jehovah" or "Jehovah comforts".

Nehemiah would be used by God as a governor of Judah under the Persian rule.

THE PROBLEMS OF THIS BOOK

As we will discover, God made a way for the Jews to leave Babylon and return to their homeland of Judah by touching the heart of Cyrus, the King of Persia. In 539 B.C., after the 70 years of captivity in Babylon, Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland of Judah (2 Chr. 36:22-23).

Judah was a part of the Promised Land God had given Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:1-7; 15:18; 17:7-8). Of course, God wanted them to return to the land He had given them.

There were three problems involved with their leaving Babylon and returning to Judah.

THE FIRST PROBLEM, MANY JEWS STAYED IN BABYLON

Many of the Jews decided to stay in Babylon and not return to the land God had given them.

There were several reasons why they decided to stay in Babylon.

One, some of them had been born in Babylon, so it was all they had ever known. They had no idea how much better the land flowing with milk and honey would be than Babylon.

Two, they had built houses and businesses in Babylon and did not want to give them up. In other words, they were comfortable where they were.

Three, the land of Judah had lain in waste for approximately 150 years. Their property and homes were in ruins as a result of the attack by the Babylonians and the process of time. They didn't think the land was worth the labor.

Four, the ancient path from Babylon to Jerusalem was a 900-mile, difficult and dangerous trip that took four months. Thieves and murderers waited to hijack travelers. This fact is seen in that Ezra spoke of how the Lord protected them as they journeyed (Ezra 8:31).

The problem was that none of their excuses for not returning to the land of Judah were acceptable to God. They were His chosen people, and the land was His gift to them. It was His will for them to return, anything less was sin. They may have been content with their reasons for remaining in Babylon, but God was not.

Like the people of Judah, God is calling His children into a life of obedience, joy and victory. Nothing in this world comes close to what God has for us.

So many modern believers are like the Jews who remained in Babylon. God has given us so much more than what we are experiencing. Few know of the abundant grace and power of God.

We will discover, the Jews who remained in Babylon did not escape problems by staying where they were. In like fashion, we never find an easier way when we reject God's way. The way of the transgressors is still hard (Pro. 13:15).

THE SECOND PROBLEM, THE WALL WAS STILL BROKEN DOWN

Those who returned to Judah during Ezra's day (13-14 years earlier) had not rebuilt the wall surrounding Jerusalem.

Three groups left Babylon and returned to the land of Judah.

The first group, led by Zerubbabel, rebuilt the Temple.

The second group, led by Ezra, helped establish spiritual worship (Ezra 1:5-6).

The third group, as described in this book, would be led by Nehemiah.

Until this third group, led by Nehemiah, returned to Judah, the wall was in the same condition it was after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city of Jerusalem approximately 150 years earlier.

The book of Nehemiah tells us how Nehemiah and those who went with him repaired this broken wall.

THE THIRD PROBLEM, OPPOSITION

Some of those living in Judah were opposed to the wall being rebuilt.

The Samaritans, of whom Sanballat belonged (2:10, 19; 4:1-2; 6:1-5), were against the wall being rebuilt. This may have something to do with why the Jews despised the Samaritans in Jesus' day (Jn. 4:9).

As we will discover, Sanballat joined forces with two men, one named Tobiah, the other named Geshem, in an attempt to stop Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the wall. These three men were descendants of three people groups God had driven out when He gave the Promised Land to the people of Israel. No doubt, their opposition to the wall came from their hatred for Israel and their God.

Nehemiah's struggles with the enemy should alert the modern believer to the fact of their enemies. The world (1 Jn. 2:16), the flesh (Mk. 14:38; Gal. 5:17), and the devil (1 Pet. 5:8), are opposed to God's work in our lives.

The situation with Nehemiah should alert us to the fact that many of God's people are content with their present spiritual condition. Their walk with God is mediocre at best. God has so much more for those who are willing to pay the cost. Many of the Jews had blended into the life of Babylon, and many today have blended into the world.

CHAPTER ONE

1. THE PASSION 1:1-4

The book of Nehemiah begins by revealing Nehemiah's passionate heart and how he cared deeply about the Jews and the condition of the city of Jerusalem.

Ne 1:1 THE words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace,

Much of this book is from Nehemiah's memoirs of events that took place in his life.

The month of "Chisleu" would be the last part of November and the first part of December on our calendar.

The "twentieth year" refers to the twentieth year in the reign of the Persian King Artaxerxes.

"Shushan", also called Susa, was the capital of Persia. The kings of Persia had a royal palace there.

The fact that Nehemiah lived in the palace tells us he was a man of importance.

Ne 1:2 That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

The word "brethren" means "of the same tribe or nation". We aren't certain if "Hanani" was a blood brother to Nehemiah. He will call him "brother" later (7:2), but the same word is used then as here.

Nehemiah asked these men about the conditions in Judah and the Jews who had endured the Babylonian captivity. His concern for Jerusalem was already being revealed by him asking this question.

Ne 1:3 And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

Hanani's response to Nehemiah's question was sad indeed.

As I mentioned, years earlier, God had touched the heart of Cyrus, King of Persia, to allow Israel to return to their homeland of Judah after the 70 years of captivity in Babylon. Yet, many of the Jews had decided to not return.

One problem that had kept many from returning to Judah was the enemies that surrounded Jerusalem.

Hanani told Nehemiah the Jews who lived in and around Jerusalem were in great "affliction". The word "affliction", which means "distress, misery, or sorrow," was a word that was connected to evil or disobedience. It is translated "evil" when describing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:9), and mankind before the flood (Gen. 6:5). God used this word because the condition of Jerusalem was the fault of the Jews. To begin with, their sin had put them in the seventy-year captivity. Now, their sin of refusing to rebuild the wall was putting them in a place of danger.

Another problem that had kept many from returning to Judah was the wall around Jerusalem was still lying in ruins. Even though some of the Jews had returned to Judah, they had not rebuilt the wall around the city.

In ancient times, most cities had walls to protect them from enemies or wild animals. These walls were strong and high and had flat tops. Because of their strength and protection, people would often build their houses against these walls. In some cities, the wall would actually become a row of houses.

The word "reproach" means "disgrace". A city with a broken-down wall was a disgrace to its inhabitants. It was like the neighbor who never mows their yard. But, in this case, it was like the neighbor had not mowed his yard for almost 170 years.

The wall was still "broken down" and the gates were still burnt as Nebuchadnezzar had left it years earlier.

Also, in Nehemiah's day, a city with a broken-down wall was a reflection of the God of the people who lived there. It was an indication that their God was not able to take care of his people.

So, why had the Jews not rebuilt the wall after almost 100 years of freedom?

- Probably because of fear

They knew when they started working on the wall, the enemy would rise as they had against Ezra (Ezra 4:7-23). So it is with the enemy of the believer. When we take a step toward God, he takes notice and moves against us.

- Probably because of the size of the job

Rebuilding the wall was a monumental task, and most of the work had to be done by hand.

- Probably because of the rubbish

The rubbish from the fallen wall would have to be moved because it would hinder their work on the new wall (4:10). In like fashion, the rubbish in the life of the believer will hinder their work for the Lord. We are told to "lay aside" every weight (Heb. 12:1). We need to rid ourselves of the junk of the world.

Nehemiah recognized the seriousness of the situation. As long as the wall was in ruins, there was the danger of the enemies of the Jews coming in and destroying the newly built Temple. That which had been accomplished since the end of the captivity could be quickly be wiped out.

So it is with the enemy of the believer. Anytime we make a move toward God, the devil is ready to come in and undo what has been accomplished.

Ne 1:4 And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,

Nehemiah's passion for the Jews caused him to turn to the Lord and pray for himself and those in Jerusalem. He, as mentioned earlier, was not a prophet or

preacher. However, as a layman, he had a burden for the condition of the Jews. He didn't wait for some preacher somewhere to take the first step.

Notice, Nehemiah "heard these words" and he listened. How often do we hear but do not listen? He did not bury his head in the sand and go about his life as though there was no problem.

The condition of some of the modern churches are as bad, or worse, than that of the Jews of Nehemiah's day.

Could it be that our God is calling out to the modern church as He did the Jews of Nehemiah's day? Is He trying to show us the broken walls and burned gates in our lives? And even more important, are we listening like Nehemiah did? Or, are we simply pretending that everything is fine and ignoring the facts?

2. THE PRAYER 1:5-11

Ne 1:5 And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments:

The word "beseech" means "ask you" and is a word of humility. Nehemiah saw God as He was and himself as he was. He came as a humble servant to the God of gods.

The words of Nehemiah's prayer are recorded in these verses.

Nehemiah started his prayer by worshiping. He simply focused on God and worshipped.

He addressed God as "LORD". The word "LORD" speaks of God as the self-existent one. He is the only being in the universe who needs no one or nothing.

The words "God of heaven" remind us that God is ruling over all creation. He rules, not only over the earth but over all things everywhere. He is the God of the universe.

God is "great" means He is able to do mighty things. Nehemiah was acknowledging the fact that what he needed and desired was not too hard for God.

The word "terrible" means "fearful" or "afraid". The enemies of Nehemiah would discover that his God was a God to be feared.

God keeps his "covenant" means He always keeps His promises. Our faith is based on what God has said (His Word), not some hope so, maybe so fairy tale.

Nehemiah knew his God was a mighty God, but he also realized much of what God does for His people depends on how much they "love him" and "observe his commandments". Many of God's promises are conditional. Quite often, He says "If" my people (cf. 2 Chr. 7:14).

The sin of the Jews had gotten them into the trouble they were in; it would take their obedience to get them out completely.

What would happen if every believer in this country united in prayer for America? It may not change the entire nation but it certainly could change our part of it. What difference would it make if every member of your church would bind together and pray for the church? God is still God and He is able.

Ne 1:6 Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.

At this point, Nehemiah makes his first request.

He asked God to listen. He asked that God's "ear" might "be attentive" and that He might "hear" his prayer.

He asked God to look. He asked that God's "eyes" might be "open".

I'm glad we have a God who hears and sees. He told Moses, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows" (Ex. 3:7).

Having a friend who knows what we are going through might not mean much, but when God knows, we can be at peace.

Nehemiah was praying for a need that was 900 miles away. I'm glad distance is no problem to God. At this point, Nehemiah was not in Jerusalem, so he could do nothing about fixing the problem. Thankfully, the distance was no problem to the God who is omnipresent (Ps. 139:8).

Ne 1:7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses.

Nehemiah said, "We". He did not point his finger at the Jews; he included himself as a part of the problem. Our "we" may be our country, our family, or our church, but we are all a part of a group that we should pray for.

Nehemiah did not try to whitewash the sinful condition of the Jews.

The word "corrupt" means "to pervert".

The "commandments", "statutes", and "judgments" refer to God's moral, ceremonial, and civil aspects of God's law. In other words, the Jews had failed God in every way imaginable.

In the next two verses, Nehemiah remembered God's own words and based his faith on what God had said. Faith is believing the Word of God.

Ne 1:8 Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:

Nehemiah asking God to "Remember" was not because He thought God might have forgotten, but a request that God might act. When the Bible says, "God remembered Noah, and every living thing", it means God was moving on the situation (Gen. 8:1).

Nehemiah remembered God's Word. He had promised Moses there would be a captivity of the Jews if they transgressed His Word (Jer. 25:9-13). God had promised to end the captivity and deliver His people. Nehemiah believed Him.

God always keeps His promises, even those where He promises to judge those who sin (Jn. 12:48; 2 Th. 2:12; Heb. 13:4).

Ne 1:9 But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.

God also promised Moses that there would be a restoration of the Jews to the land of Judah (Dt. 30:1-5).

Ne 1:10 Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand.

This speaks of God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. God's "great power" and "strong hand" were seen in Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh and Egypt. The parting of the Red Sea and Israel going across on dry ground (Ex. 14:22), was just one part of God's mighty work.

The same God who brought them out of Egypt had brought them out of Babylon. As he did the first time, He would do the second.

God can do it again. The God who has revived His people in days gone by can do the same today. God has not changed.

Ne 1:11 O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.

Nehemiah prayed for God to work, but he also asked God to use him to accomplish the work. He had been used to the luxury of the palace and plenty, but he was willing to give it up and do the will of God.

Two of the most important parts of Nehemiah's prayer are found in the verse.

One, the fact that some of the Jews were truly "servants". Most were not, but some were willing to do as God said. God does great things with few. He brought victory for Gideon with 300 men (Judges 7:7).

Two, the fact that some desired to "fear" the name of God. When God's people fear only God, there is no end to what might be accomplished.

Nehemiah asked God to "prosper" him in the task ahead. The word "prosper" means "to push forward". It means to make all the necessary moves to cause a desired end. This word is found 48 times in the Old Testament. It is found first where Abraham said to his servant, "The LORD, before whom I walk, will send his angel with thee, and prosper thy way; and thou shalt take a wife for my son of my kindred, and of my father's house" (Gen. 24:4).

He asked that God touch the heart of "this man" (King Artaxerxes).

And so we see the passion of Nehemiah. He longed to see God moving and His people right with Him. A desire is so important in the life of a believer. It is what drives us towards God. It keeps us going when we are weary.

Nehemiah ended his prayer with the words, "For I was the king's cupbearer". I believe he did this to make the point of the difficulty of the situation. The king and his cupbearer, because of the nature of their relationship, became close. The king trusted his cupbearer with his life. That meant Artaxerxes would not want to let Nehemiah go. That meant also, God would have to touch his heart. This was one of many prayers that needed to be answered if Nehemiah was going to rebuild the wall.

CHAPTER TWO

3. THE PERMISSION 2:1-6

After praying for four months without saying anything, Nehemiah turned to King Artaxerxes to ask for permission to go to Jerusalem.

Ne 2:1 And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence.

It was four months from the month of Chisleu (1:1) to the month of "Nisan". Nehemiah had prayed for these months without saying anything to King Artaxerxes about the state of Jerusalem.

As we will discover, those four months of prayer were not wasted. In answer to Nehemiah's prayer, God had been working on the heart of Artaxerxes. One of the biggest obstacles to the rebuilding of the walls had been taken care of with Nehemiah uttering a word to anyone.

Being the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah did as he had done many times before: he tasted the king's wine and gave it to him. However, this time was different in that he was "sad". He had been able to hide his heartbreak up to this point, but for some reason, this day, he could hide it no longer. There are times when our burden gets too heavy to hide.

Ne 2:2 Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid,

The closeness of Artaxerxes and Nehemiah is seen in the fact that the king noticed Nehemiah's somber mood. He could tell Nehemiah was depressed and not sick.

Nehemiah was "sore afraid". His fear was justified because a king was held in such high esteem.

Being sad in a king's presence was considered a sign of disrespect, disloyalty, or ungratefulness. It was seen as dissatisfaction with the king or his leadership.

Also, being sad in a king's presence could be misinterpreted as a sign of bad news that had, as of yet, not been disclosed to the king.

One job of a cupbearer was to make sure the king stayed in a good mood. A displeased king could punish or execute anyone who made him angry.

Ne 2:3 And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?

Nehemiah addressed the king with humility and respect. He had no ill feelings toward the king. He honestly wanted him to be prosperous.

Nehemiah referred to Jerusalem as the place of his "father's sepulchres". He saw Jerusalem as a place that should be honored.

Much of the city was in the same condition as it was after Nebuchadnezzar attacked. Parts of the city lay in "waste". It was beyond repair and needed to be removed and discarded. The "gates" of the wall had been burnt and would need to be replaced.

As I have mentioned, an unwallled city was easy prey to the enemy. Anything of value could easily be stolen.

There are times when things are so bad that they are beyond repair; they must be replaced.

A devoted Jew saw Jerusalem as sacred. It was the place that represented all that they believed about God. They saw it as a place that they should never forget. The psalmist wrote, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget her cunning" (Ps 137:5), and "If I do not remember thee, Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; If I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy" (Ps 137:6).

The words "why should not my countenance be sad" speak volumes. Nehemiah was saying it was natural for him to be troubled about the condition of Jerusalem. It would be abnormal to be unconcerned. How could anyone see its horrible state and not be heartbroken?

The same is true of the New Testament church. All believers should be concerned about the areas where it is failing.

In this verse, Nehemiah was saying it was right for him to be upset. As difficult as it was, he saw things as they were. There are times when we, like Nehemiah, must face the facts. Pretending that everything is fine makes matters only worse.

Ne 2:4 Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Perhaps Nehemiah expected an angry outburst, but the opposite took place. The king not only was not angry, he immediately asked how he could help.

Nehemiah prayed again, but this time his prayer was quick. Every step along the way, Nehemiah was asking for God's direction. He knew he had to follow the Lord, so every step mattered. I don't think we can have a lot of faith in our "quick" prayers if we haven't been having times of extended prayer.

We make a mess when we make our own plans and do what seems right to us. Solomon said, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes" (Pr 12:15), and "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: But whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered" (Pr 28:26).

Every believer should learn to pray without ceasing (1 Th. 5:17) to make sure they don't do anything foolish.

Ne 2:5 And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it.

This verse shows us how Nehemiah's prayers had prepared him for this moment. He already knew what he would need to do the job he had been called to do.

God gave Nehemiah the words he needed exactly when he needed them.

In Nehemiah's response, he reminded the king of his faithfulness as his cupbearer. No doubt, while serving as cupbearer, Nehemiah, like Joseph with Potiphar (Gen. 39:1-6), had served the king faithfully. Their relationship was more than business.

Sooner or later, it will matter how faithful we are during difficult situations. Had Nehemiah not been faithful to God while serving the king, the outcome would probably have been totally different.

Nehemiah asked the king to "send" him to Judah. Of course, the "city of my father's sepulchres" refers to Jerusalem. Nehemiah chose not to call Jerusalem by name. He realized the conflict Artaxerxes had earlier with the Jews when he stopped the building may have stirred negative feelings.

Ne 2:6 And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.

The queen sitting with him lets us know this was a private setting. It may be that her presence helped influence the king to grant Nehemiah's request.

The king wanted to know how long Nehemiah's project would take and when he would return.

Nehemiah, having already prayed and planned, was able to tell the king approximately how long he would be gone.

4. **THE PROTECTION** 2:7

Ne 2:7 Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah;

The fact that Artaxerxes was willing to assist Nehemiah and the construction of the wall was nothing short of a miracle. This is especially true since years earlier he had stopped the building of the Temple (Ezra 4:7-23). The actions are so different from this Artaxerxes and the one in Ezra 4, that some believe there must have been two kings by that name. The simple truth is God had touched his heart.

Knowing he would encounter opposition from his enemies, Nehemiah asked for "letters" that would permit him to move through the provinces of the land on the way to Jerusalem.

The letters were the official authority of the king of Persia. Nehemiah went with the approval of the king of Persia, but more importantly, he went with the approval of the King of Kings.

5. **THE PROVISION** 2:8-9

Ne 2:8 And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.

Knowing he would need lumber, Nehemiah asked for "letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest".

Nehemiah recognized that the "good hand" of God was at work in this work. Only God could touch the heart of men who cared nothing for God or His work and cause them to do such as this.

Ne 2:9 Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me.

Nehemiah said, "Then I came". He did what God had told him to do. Many talk about what needs to be done, but few actually do it. The devil doesn't mind if we only talk about doing.

The "river" is the Euphrates River, which separated one region from another.

Nehemiah made his journey using the king's letters to gain passage through the territory.

Artaxerxes went so far as to send a military escort with Nehemiah. These soldiers remained in Jerusalem to protect him (Neh. 4:23). This military assistance was something Nehemiah had not asked for but certainly welcomed. It's wonderful that God would so touch the heart of a pagan king so that he gave Nehemiah not only what he asked for, but more than he asked for. Is not our God a good God?

6. THE PESSIMISTS 2:10

Ne 2:10 When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.

Nehemiah mentions those who opposed the building of the wall. Sanballat and Tobiah wanted to keep Jerusalem and the Jews weak and controllable. They began a plan to stop Nehemiah. There will always be those who hate God, His work, and His people.

Sanballat was a Persian governor who rule over the province of Samaria. A governor served as a representative of the king and held significant power over their territory. It was their responsibility to collect taxes, maintain security, hear legal cases, and supervise local officials.

Tobiah served as a political official, likely in the region of Ammon. He was a man with influence. The Ammonites were an idol worshipping pagan people who were long enemies of the Jews (Dt. 2:19; 23:3-4).

This makes it easy to see why Sanballat was so angry about Nehemiah coming to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. He did not want anyone disrupting his power over the people.

Any time we do anything for the Lord, we should expect opposition. The devil will not sit back and let God's work continue without fighting against it.

Their opposition will cause distress among those helping with the wall.

7. THE PLAN 2:11-16

Nehemiah did not roar into town with his six-shooter blaring. He came in quietly with God's plan.

Ne 2:11 So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

Nehemiah arrived at Jerusalem, but he did not go immediately into action. He waited "three days", perhaps simply resting from his long journey.

Ne 2:12 And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon.

After three days, Nehemiah and some of his men "arose in the night" to survey the city. He knew he needed to analyze the situation before he went into action. Many a worthy project has failed because of haste.

He said nothing to anyone else about his actions. He understood the evil heart of man and knew he could not trust everyone. His enemies knew he was in Jerusalem, so he did not want them to know his movements.

To stay as quiet as possible, those who went with him went on foot, and he took only the beast he rode upon.

Ne 2:13 And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire.

Nehemiah went outside the city using the valley gate and made a counter-clockwise path around Jerusalem.

He "viewed" the walls. This was the first time he saw with his own eyes the condition of the wall and the extent of the damage. I'm sure he wept as he looked at the ruins of the beloved city.

Ne 2:14 Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass.

The heaps of debris were so extensive that they could not get through.

Ne 2:15 Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned.

The "brook" is the brook Kidron.

The fact that several gates are not mentioned probably means he did not circle the entire city.

He came back into the city at the valley gate, which was the same gate he went out by (cf. 2:13).

Ne 2:16 And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.

Nehemiah had not told the "priests", the "nobles", the "rulers", nor any of the "people", about his survey of the city.

The priests, being those who were supposed to assist the people to know and do God's will, should have already lead them to rebuild the walls.

The "nobles" and the "rulers", being the leaders of the people should have initiated a rebuilding program.

The "rest", who were the common people, were the ones who would do the work when the wall was repaired.

8. THE PLEA 2:17-20

Ne 2:17 Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.

Nehemiah met with the people of Jerusalem to discuss his plans and make his plea for help. He knew he needed these men for the job was too big for him alone. If they refused to help, his dream would come to an end before it started.

Nehemiah's first step was to convince the Jews to look at the problem.

These were the ones who had been living in the broken-down Jerusalem and had gotten used to its condition. They had become content with the rubbish. It would take a move of God to move them.

Notice, Nehemiah said the distress "we are in". He didn't just point a finger at the citizens of Jerusalem; he included himself as a part of the problem.

Every believer needs to take regular surveys throughout their lives. Like Nehemiah, we need to be honest with ourselves if our spiritual walls have been damaged. Until we admit what is wrong, it can not be fixed. Pretending things are ok when they are not will only make matters worse.

The word "distress" means "bad". They were in bad shape. Nehemiah was honest and open about the horrible condition of Jerusalem. However, he immediately encouraged the people to rise up and "build".

Nehemiah included himself in the solution to the problem. He said, "*come*, and let *us* build up the wall" (emphases added).

That "we be no more a reproach" was the goal of Nehemiah.

Jerusalem was once considered the spiritual capital of the world. God had the Temple built so that He might meet with His people. For it to be in shambles was a reproach to God and the Jews.

It was a reproach that the Jews sinned in such a fashion that caused God to send them to a seventy-year captivity. It was a reproach that many of the Jews had stayed in Babylon after the captivity ended. It was a reproach that the Jews who were in Judah had not already rebuilt the wall.

Lifting the reproach from God's people would be worth the effort of rebuilding.

Ne 2:18 Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.

Nehemiah was careful to encourage the people by saying "the hand of my God" was "good upon me". He told them how God had touched the heart of Artaxerxes and how he had provided thus far.

He was assuring them that this was not a personal project that he had devised on his own. He saw this project as a calling from God and believed God always blesses that which He designs.

Nehemiah's motivation to the people was that the Lord's will might be done. That should be all the incentive we as believers ever need.

Fortunately, the Jews agreed with Nehemiah and determined to get to work on the wall.

They said, "Let us rise up and build". The first step of the project, the commitment to work, had begun. God had touched the heart of Nehemiah, a pagan king, and now He had touched the Jews. They had seen the need and accepted the responsibility of doing what was necessary to solve the problem.

The word "strengthened" means "strong and courageous". They would need both before the task was done.

They could have decided to stay as they were and told Nehemiah to go back home, but they chose to "rise up and build".

Ne 2:19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us,

and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?

Sanballat and Tobiah had already let their displeasure be known about Nehemiah (2:10), now they were doing more, and speaking out. They had recruited Geshem in their attack against the rebuilding of the walls.

Like Sanballat and Tobiah (2:10), Geshem served as a leader in Judah.

The Horonites and Ammonites were groups of people God had driven from the Promised Land for the people of Israel. In other words, some of the old enemies of the Jews were still fighting against them. In like fashion, the flesh and the devil never give up.

These three would try at least seven times to stop Nehemiah (2:19; 4:1-3; 4:7-23; 6:1-4; 6:5-9; 6:10-14; 6:17-19).

As the enemies of God's work are always prone to do, they were keeping their eyes and ears open to the movements of Nehemiah. The devil is always attentive. He is "seeking" (1 Pet. 5:8).

To "laugh to scorn" means they derided Nehemiah and his plan. The word "scorn" is the same word used to describe the mocking of those around the cross (Ps. 22:7). They "laughed" but they would not laugh long. Those who have no basis for their argument, will often turn to mockery of those they disagree with.

The word "despised" means "to disrespect". It means to take lightly or think little of. It's the same word used about Esau despising his birthright (Gen. 25:34). He didn't think much of it. We should not be surprised if the world thinks little of us.

This trio knew Nehemiah had permission from the king but they spoke of him rebelling against him. Perhaps they were hinting that they would lie to the king about the actions of Nehemiah and the Jews.

They were using every method of attack they could think of. They may have spoken this in a public setting and were hoping to put fear in the minds of those who were listening. In like fashion, the enemies of Christ wrongly accused Him of rebelling against the Roman government (Lk. 23:14), and destroying the Temple (Mt. 14:58). Truth means nothing to a liar.

Ne 2:20 Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah did not back down from Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. We don't have to fear any man when we are on God's side.

Nehemiah did not let the enemy discourage him. He affirmed the fact that the God was with him. He knew he not only had the approval of the king Artaxerxes, he had the approval of "The God of heaven".

The words "he will prosper us" reveal Nehemiah's faith in God. When we are doing that which is God's will, we can be sure He will "prosper us". The words "we his servants will arise and build" reveal his faith in his fellow Jews. What could be better than to know you can trust God and His people?

Nehemiah made it clear that Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem would see this mighty work but they would have "no portion, nor right, nor memorial" with what God did. Those who set themselves against the work and will of God receive none of its benefit.

CHAPTER THREE

9. THE PROGRESS 3:1-32

The task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, especially with such opposition, required a tremendous amount of organization. As we will see, Nehemiah assigned every person a specific place to work. The word "next", as used in "next to" or "next unto", is found 15 times in this one chapter.

The construction is described in connection to the gates in the wall. The gates gave entry and exit to the city and were the most critical part of the wall. They started working at a gate and worked along the wall from that point.

The wall Nehemiah rebuilt had ten gates. The gate of "Ephraim" (8:16) and the "prison" gate (12:39) are mentioned later. Each gate had its unique name and purpose.

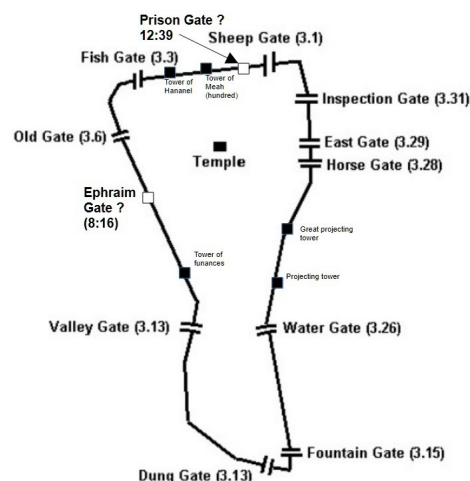
Each gate reminds us of a believer and their walk with the Lord.

Chapter three lists the people who repaired the wall and gates.

Ne 3:1 Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they builded the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up the doors of it; even unto the tower of Meah they sanctified it, unto the tower of Hananeel.

The image to the right shows the wall and gates that Nehemiah worked on.

As mentioned above, the construction is described in connection to the gates in the wall. They started working at a gate and worked along the wall from that point.



FIRST GATE, SHEEP GATE THIS GATE DEALS WITH THE SHEEP

Nehemiah started working at the "sheep gate" and worked around the wall counter-clockwise.

The sheep gate should remind us of sacrifice. Jesus gave Himself on the cross for the supreme sacrifice for sin (Heb. 1:3; 9:12; 10:12).

The sheep gate should remind us of slaughter. Hundreds of thousands of animals lost their lives to sacrifice. Solomon sacrificed 142,000 when dedication the Temple. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded 256,000 sheep sacrificed during one Passover.

As awful as these facts are, they are nothing compared to the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah tells us Jesus was so beaten and battered that He did

not look like a human. He wrote, "his visage was so marred more than any man" (Isa. 52:14).

The sheep gate should remind us of salvation. The sacrifices of animal only covered sin (Heb. 10:4), but the sacrifice of Christ provides the way to cleanse all sin (1 Jn. 1:7). He provided a way of forgiveness to anyone who will believe and repent.

Notice the wall started (v.1), and finished (v.32), at the sheep gate. Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

The high priest "Eliashib", whose name means "God will restore", headed up a group of priests to work on the wall. He had come from Babylon with the group who came with Zerubbabel.

It is not a surprise that Nehemiah had the "priests" repair the portion of wall at the "sheep gate". It was called the sheep gate because the animals for the sacrifices the priests offered were brought into the city through this gate.

They "sanctified" it probably means that after they completed the gate, they offered sacrifices and prayed. The sheep gate, after years of sitting in ruins, was being used again as God had directed. This is the only gate that the Bible says was sanctified.

The sheep gate was close to the Temple.

Offering the sacrifice and praying shows us there was more involved than simply repairing a wall. Nehemiah had a heart for God and wanted the Jews to turn to Him.

They repaired the wall past the tower of "Meah" (which means a hundred), to the tower of "Hananeel". These were two of the watchtowers built into the wall for guards to provide defense.

Ne 3:2 And next unto him builded the men of Jericho. And next to them builded Zaccur the son of Imri.

Nehemiah assigned men from outside of Jerusalem to work on the wall. There were men from Jericho (v.2), Tekoa (v.5), Gibeon (v.7), and Mizpah (v.7).

God's grace is seen in the fact that He had once cursed (Josh. 6:26), but now uses men from Jericho. They not only work on the wall but they work with the priests.

SECOND GATE, FISH GATE THIS GATE DEALS WITH THE SEARCH

Ne 3:3 But the fish gate did the sons of Hassenaah build, who also laid the beams thereof, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof.

The second gate was the fish gate. It was the gate used by fishermen bringing their catch into the city. Jesus said, "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men" (Mk 1:17). The first place a believer goes after they walk through the sheep gate, is the fish gate.

Those who fished actually went out searching for fish. Jesus came to "seek" and save that which was lost (Lk. 19:10). Believers are to go out seeking them who are lost in sin. Jesus told a parable about those who were seeking after lost

sheep (Lk. 15:4-7) and lost silver (Lk. 15:8-10), and a lost son (Lk. 15:11-32).

As the believer lives their daily lives, they are to be watching for those who are lost that they might tell them about Jesus.

The "locks" and "bars" were the hardware needed to close and lock the gates.

Ne 3:4 And next unto them repaired Meremoth the son of Urijah, the son of Koz. And next unto them repaired Meshullam the son of Berechiah, the son of Meshezabeel. And next unto them repaired Zadok the son of Baana.

Meremoth worked on two parts of the wall (v.21)

Ne 3:5 And next unto them the Tekoites repaired; but their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord.

While the common Tekoites worked willingly (cf. 3:27), the "nobles" (chief persons) of the "Tekoites" refused to help in the work. These are the only ones mentioned in this entire chapter who refused to work.

I wonder if they regretted their decision when the wall was complete and Jerusalem was thriving again. Like all who live half-hearted lives in God's service, they will suffer loss of reward.

The word "neck" refers to the back of the neck where a load was carried. We are not told if their lack was because of laziness, pride, or disagreement with the project.

Their "Lord" may mean their family head, Nehemiah, or God Himself. This phrase tells us their problem was submission.

THIRD GATE, OLD GATE THIS GATE DEALS WITH THE STANDARDS

Ne 3:6 Moreover the old gate repaired Jehoiada the son of Paseah, and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah; they laid the beams thereof, and set up the doors thereof, and the locks thereof, and the bars thereof.

The third gate was the "old gate". It was one of the original gates ever built.

The old gate should remind us of the old-fashion standards that were a part of days gone by.

These standards produce peace. Jeremiah wrote, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart" (Jer. 15:16).

These standards produce power. God gives power to those who obey His Word and walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 6:11).

These standards produce purity. David wrote, "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word" (Ps 119:9), and "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Ps 119:11).

Certainly we should be reminded here of the old paths (Jer. 6:16). We should never allow ourselves to stray from that which is tried and tested. We do not need a new way, we need to trust the old way. God doesn't have a new way to salvation, service, or blessing.

From the very beginning, the devil tried to get Adam and Eve to compromise God's Word. He told Eve "Ye shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). His tactics have not changed. He still tries to get God's people to compromise their walk with the

Lord.

God's message has not changed, He still tells us, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate" (2 Co 6:17).

Notice, Nehemiah assigned more workers to this gate than any of the others. Does this not show us the importance of protecting the old time way of trusting and serving God?

Ne 3:7 And next unto them repaired Melatiah the Gibeonite, and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon, and of Mizpah, unto the throne of the governor on this side the river.

Ne 3:8 Next unto him repaired Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, of the goldsmiths. Next unto him also repaired Hananiah the son of one of the apothecaries, and they fortified Jerusalem unto the broad wall.

The vocation of some of the workers was given. As mentioned earlier, most were not skilled construction workers. Here, one of the "goldsmiths" and "apothecaries" (perfume makers), were mentioned. The Levites (v.17) and the merchants (v.31-32) are mentioned later.

Ne 3:9 And next unto them repaired Rephaiah the son of Hur, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem.

It seems perhaps the city of Jerusalem was divided in two parts with Rehphaiah being the governor of one and Shallum being the second (3:12).

It is refreshing to read of how even the most high esteemed of leaders were willing to humble themselves and do the work of a laborer when it was for the Lord.

Ne 3:10 And next unto them repaired Jedaiah the son of Harumaph, even over against his house. And next unto him repaired Hattush the son of Hashabniah.

Jedaiah was one of the ones whom Nehemiah had repair the part of the wall that was close to his "house".

Ne 3:11 Malchijah the son of Harim, and Hashub the son of Pahath-moab, repaired the other piece, and the tower of the furnaces.

Ne 3:12 And next unto him repaired Shallum the son of Halohesh, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, he and his daughters.

Shallum's "daughters" helped with the wall. The job was not restricted to men only.

God uses women in many ways. While the Bible does restrict women from being preachers (1 Tim. 3:2) or deacon (1 Tim. 3:8), women are a vital part of the work of God. Women were very much a part of Jesus' life and ministry (Lk. 1:27; 10:38-39; 24:10; Mt. 27:61; 28:8).

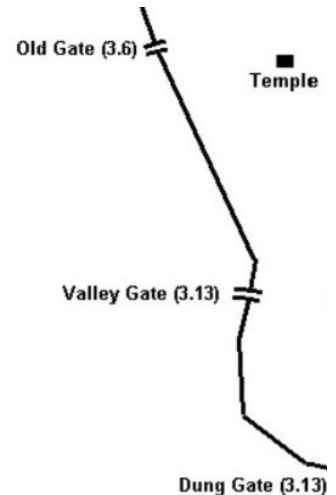
FOURTH GATE, VALLEY GATE THIS GATE DEALS WITH THE SUFFERING

Ne 3:13 The valley gate repaired Hanun, and the inhabitants of Zanoah; they built it, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof, and a thousand cubits on the wall unto the dung gate.

The fourth gate was the "valley gate" and the one Nehemiah used during his night of examining the city (2:12-13).

The city of Jerusalem is surrounded by different valleys. This gate opens into the valley of Hinnom.

Notice the distance between this gate and those closest to it. There is a "thousand cubits" (approximately 1,500 feet) between the valley and dung gates. Our valleys can seem long and so difficult.



First, the valley gate can remind us of our need for humility. Solomon said, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Pro. 16:18), and "A man's pride shall bring him low" (Pro. 29:23). James said, "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble" (Jam. 4:6).

Second, the valley gate can remind us of the difficult times of our lives.

We need to be careful while in the valley. It's easy to get discouraged in the valley (Num. 32:9), and defeated while in the valley (Josh. 7:24).

A valley can be deep. A believer can experience some low spots in their lives. Job said "Let the day perish wherein I was born" (Job 3:3). Elijah wished that he might die (1 Kgs. 19:4). David said, "I am weary with my groaning" (Ps. 6:6).

A valley can be dark. Often, the sun is blocked by trees and surrounding mountains. Dark places can be scary. David said, "Surely the darkness shall cover me" (Ps. 139:110).

A valley can be difficult. The terrain in the valley can be rugged. The valleys in our lives may be difficult to endure. Many tears and many fears can be found in the valley.

A valley can be delightful. Even though valleys can be deep, dark, and difficult, they can also be delightful. The soil is richest in the valley. It produces the best fruit. The green pastures are found in the valley (Ps 23:2a). Still waters are found in the valley (Ps 23:2b). Lilies bloom in the valley (Song. 2:1).

God's greatest blessings can come in the valleys (Dt. 1:24-25). He puts wells of water in the valley (Gen. 26:17-18; Ps. 84:6). Thankfully, there are times when God is strongest in the valley. David slew Goliath in a valley (1 Sam. 17:2-3).

We can certainly agree with the song writer who said, "Even in the valley, God is good".

FIFTH GATE, DUNG GATE THIS GATE WITH THE SANITATION

Ne 3:14 But the dung gate repaired Malchiah the son of Rechab, the ruler of part of Beth-haccerem; he built it, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof.

The fifth gate was "dung gate". All the trash of the city was carried through this gate.

This was one of the most important gates in the wall. If the waste and trash were left in the city it would decay and stink. More importantly, it would cause disease and death. In like fashion, it is spiritually unhealthy when a believer who refuses to rid themselves of that which is not spiritual.

The Bible speaks of how we need to get rid of things that are not helpful (Ecc. 3:6; Ezk. 18:31; Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:5; Heb. 12:1; Jam. 1:21). Peter said, "Wherefore laying aside (which means get rid of) all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings" (1 Pe 2:1).

It is no coincidence that the valley gate comes before the Dung gate. God will send us through the valley that He might show us the need to get rid of those things we need to get rid of.

The purpose of the gate is unusual. The other gates were used to bring stuff into the city. This one was used to take stuff out.

The placement of the gate is understandable. It was close to the Valley of Hinnom, which was the city dump. It's placement made it easier to take the garbage out.

The problem of the gate is undeniable. If you did not use this gate, everyone knew about it. It doesn't take long for trash to stink. When we neglect the spiritual trash in our lives, it doesn't take long for everyone to notice. Taking garbage out is not easy, but it must be done. Us admitting we have things in our lives that need to be gotten rid of will not be easy, but it must be done.

The profit of the gate is unmistakable. Getting rid of the household trash made the home so much more enjoyable. The same is true of our spiritual trash. We are getting rid of that which hinders, harms, and hurts us.

We carry our trash out by confessing (1 Jn. 1:9) and repenting (Rev. 2:5).

SIXTH GATE, FOUNTAIN GATE THIS GATE DEALS WITH THE SPIRIT

Ne 3:15 But the gate of the fountain repaired Shallun the son of Col-hozeh, the ruler of part of Mizpah; he built it, and covered it, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof, and the wall of the pool of Siloah by the king's garden, and unto the stairs that go down from the city of David.

The sixth gate was the "fountain" gate.

I believe the fountain gate is a picture of the flowing power of the filling of the Holy Spirit in a believer (Acts 11:24; Gal. 5:25; Eph. 5:18). In the Bible, water is a symbol of the Word of God (Jn. 4:14, 7:37; 15:3; Eph. 5:26) but flowing water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 7:38).

The Spirit-filled believer is a fountain of gushing water. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would be "a well of water springing up into everlasting life" in the believer (Jn 4:14). Like the moving of the Spirit, a fountain is never still nor stagnant. The Holy Spirit stirs, refreshes, and empowers the believer.

The fountain gate should remind us how Jesus said, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink (Jn 7:37).

Unfortunately, this gate also reminds us of how many refuse to submit to the work of the Holy Spirit.

God said, "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Je 2:13). They not only reject God's source of power but they try to make their own. A fountain is a natural source of refreshment, but a cistern is a man-made bowl where water is stored. To make matters worse, their cisterns have holes and won't hold water. In other words, they offer no help whatsoever. All man's self-effort is useless and empty.

Notice that the fountain gate came after the dung gate. In like fashion, until we rid ourselves of that which displeases God, we will never experience the flowing power of the Holy Spirit.

Interestingly, Nehemiah makes no mention of the repair on the wall between the dung and fountain gates. This seems strange, especially since this was the section of the wall where Nehemiah said there was not enough room for him to pass when he inspected the wall (2:14). That makes it sound like this was the part of the wall that received the greatest attack and the greatest damage from the siege of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs. 25:4).

The same is certainly true in the spiritual realm, for our enemy hates the moving of the Holy Spirit. His attack is great. He will do everything he can to hinder the Spirit's work in our lives. And the damage is great. The lack of the moving power of the Holy Spirit has robbed us of our joy, peace, and power.

We are not told why the repair of this section is not mentioned. Spiritually, I believe it is because when we remove the garbage (dung gate) from our lives, the Holy Spirit is immediately able to flow through us (fountain gate).

This is the only gate that had a roof (covered) built over it.

This gate was close to the "king's garden," which was by the pool of Siloah, also called Siloam. This was the place where the blind man was healed (Jn. 9:7-8).

King Hezekiah built the Pool of Siloam (2 Kgs. 20:20) to provide water for Jerusalem. He cut a tunnel to divert water into the city from the Gihon Springs. This tunnel was approximately 1,750 feet long and cut through solid rock. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed this tunnel when he attacked Jerusalem.

The city, being built on uneven ground, requires "stairs". These are the steps used when the people of Israel ascended singing the Psalms of Ascent when they returned to Jerusalem to celebrate annual feasts (Ps. 120-134). It speaks of the upward walk of a believer as he draws ever closer to the Lord.

In the next five verses, Nehemiah listed those who were working on the wall.

Ne 3:16 After him repaired Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, the ruler of the half part of Beth-zur unto the place over against the sepulchres of David, and to the pool that was made, and unto the house of the mighty.

The "sepulchres of David" refer to the burial place of David and his family (1 Kgs. 2:10).

The "house of the mighty" may have been the place where David's mighty men stayed on occasion (2 Sam. 23:8).

Ne 3:17 After him repaired the Levites, Rehum the son of Bani. Next unto him repaired Hashabiah, the ruler of the half part of Keilah, in his part.

Some of the "Levites" helped to build this part of the wall.

Ne 3:18-21 After him repaired their brethren, Bavai the son of Henadad, the ruler of the half part of Keilah. And next to him repaired Ezer the son of Jeshua, the ruler of Mizpah, another piece over against the going up to the armoury at the turning of the wall. After him Baruch the son of Zabbai earnestly repaired the other piece, from the turning of the wall unto the door of the house of Eliashib the high priest. After him repaired Meremoth the son of Urijah the son of Koz another piece, from the door of the house of Eliashib (ELI ASH IB) even to the end of the house of Eliashib.

As mentioned earlier (cf. v.4), Meremoth worked on two parts of the wall.

Ne 3:22-23 And after him repaired the priests, the men of the plain. After him repaired Benjamin and Hashub over against their house. After him repaired Azariah the son of Maaseiah the son of Ananiah by his house.

Benjamin, Hashub, and Aazriah, were among those whom Nehemiah had repaired the part of the wall that was close to his "house".

Ne 3:24-25 After him repaired Binnui the son of Henadad another piece, from the house of Azariah unto the turning of the wall, even unto the corner. Palal the son of Uzai, over against the turning of the wall, and the tower which lieth out from the king's high house, that was by the court of the prison. After him Pedaiah the son of Parosh.

SEVENTH GATE, WATER GATE THIS GATE DEALS WITH THE SCRIPTURE

Ne 3:26 Moreover the Nethinims dwelt in Ophel, unto the place over against the water gate toward the east, and the tower that lieth out.

The seventh gate was the "water gate".

The city of Jerusalem was built in a location where there was no river. The closest is the Jordan River, which is 21 miles away. For this reason, the city depended on reservoirs and springs.

The water gate is a picture of the Word of God.

As mentioned earlier, water is often used as a symbol of the Word of God (Ezk. 36:25; Jn. 3:5; Eph. 5:26).

Notice, text says nothing about the gate, but only the wall, being repaired. Obviously, this makes us think of the fact that the Word of God cannot be damaged and will never need any repair.

David said, "For ever, O LORD, Thy word is settled in heaven" (Ps 119:89). Peter said, "But the word of the Lord endureth for ever" (1 Pet. 1:25).

The devil has attacked the Word since He first lied to Eve (Gen. 3:4).

Notice, this gate comes after the fountain gate. This is understandable since the work of the Spirit and the Word go together.

Like water, the Word of God washes away the filth of the world. The Word will wash away error. Jesus said, "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures" (Mt. 22:29). The Word will wash away doubt. Paul said, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). The Word washes away fear. David said, "This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me" (Ps

119:50). The Word also washes away sin. Jesus said, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (Jn. 15:3).

The Nethinims were Temple servants who assisted the Levites in the Temple. They did simple but vital tasks such as cutting wood and carrying water. Thank the Lord for those who are willing to do the less glamorous jobs for the Lord.

Ne 3:27 After them the Tekoites repaired another piece, over against the great tower that lieth out, even unto the wall of Ophel.

The "great tower" is also known as the great "projecting" tower.

We read earlier about the "Tekoites" working on another section of the wall (3:5). The "nobles" weren't willing to work, but the common folks must have wanted to do more. Thank the Lord for those who always want to do more for the Lord.

EIGHTH GATE, HORSE GATE THIS GATE DEALS WITH THE SOLDIERS

Ne 3:28 From above the horse gate repaired the priests, every one over against his house.

The eighth gate was the "horse gate".

This may have been the gate used by soldiers to enter and exit the city.

The king's stables were close to this gate. God forbade the kings of Israel from having horses (Dt. 17:14-16). During times of war, God wanted His people to trust Him, not in horses. Solomon ignored this command by having 4,000 stalls for horses and chariots and 12,000 horsemen (2 Chr. 9:25).

In the Bible, a horse is used for battle and is a symbol of war (Pro. 21:31). The horse's strength and stability made it a good choice during war (Job 39:19-25).

The horse gate reminds us of the spiritual battle of believers.

The believer has an enemy.

We wrestle against "the rulers of the darkness of this world" and "spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). Our enemy, the devil, hates and opposes the work of God. He searches the earth seeking the one he "may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8).

God tells us to stand against our enemy.

The believer is admonished to be ready for battle. God tells us to "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12), "war a good warfare" (1 Tim. 1:18), "be strong in the Lord, and the power of his might" (Eph. 6:10), and "endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Tim. 2:3). We are to trust the Lord (Jam. 4:7a), and resist the devil (Jam. 4:7b).

Fortunately, our Lord gives us what we need to defend ourselves and defeat the devil.

Our weapons are spiritual and not made by man (Ps 20:7; 2 Cor. 10:4). Our power should come from God and nothing else. Paul said, "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (Eph 6:1). We are to "Put on the whole armour of God" (Eph 6:11).

This gate also reminds me of the day when Jesus will return to this earth on a white horse to wage war with the Anti-Christ, the False Prophet, and their army (Rev. 19:11).

The "priests" repaired the sections of the wall that were beside their houses. Notice, none of their names are given. Many of God's choice servants serve without being recognized by man. This is the third time we see the priests helping in the repair of the wall (cf. v. 1, 22)

NINTH GATE, EAST GATE THIS GATE DEALS WITH THE SON

Ne 3:29 After them repaired Zadok the son of Immer over against his house. After him repaired also Shemaiah the son of Shechaniah, the keeper of the east gate.

The ninth gate was the "east gate".

The modern gate, also called the Golden Gate, was built on the same general site as the one Nehemiah worked on, but it is not the same gate. The modern gate, not being the identical gate of Nehemiah's day, does not reduce the Biblical importance of the east gate.

Jewish tradition says the Messiah will return and enter Jerusalem through the eastern gate. We know the Messiah will return to establish His kingdom on earth.

This kingdom is promised.

God told David He would set up a kingdom that would last forever (2 Sam. 7:16). Jesus said, "When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory" (Mt 25:31). At that time, Jesus will say, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt 25:3).

This kingdom is postponed.

The Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah (Jn. 1:11), so God postponed the kingdom and turned to the Gentiles.

This kingdom is powerful.

It will be a kingdom characterized by purity (Ezk. 36:24-27), peace (Isa. 65:21), prosperity (Isa. 65:21), and paradise (Isa. 35:1, 5-6) on earth.

Ne 3:30 After him repaired Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph another piece. After him repaired Meshullam the son of Berechiah over against his chamber.

TENTH GATE, MIPHKAD GATE THIS GATE DEALS WITH THE SUMMONS

Ne 3:31 After him repaired Malchiah the goldsmith's son unto the place of the Nethinims, and of the merchants, over against the gate Miphkad, and to the going up of the corner.

The tenth gate was the "Miphkad" gate.

The word "Miphkad" means "assignment" or "appointment".

This was the place where the army was summoned to be reviewed. The army would need to be examined before and after they went to a battle. Though trusting military might instead of God was wrong, going to war without proper preparation would be unwise (Pro. 20:18; 24:6; Lk. 14:31).

This gate reminds us of the day all believers will be summoned before their Lord to be reviewed (1 Pet. 4:5; Heb. 9:27b).

This judgment deals with believers only and will determine their receiving or losing rewards. Those who are lost will stand before the Lord at the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:12-15).

Paul wrote, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be bad" (2 Co 5:10).

We will stand before the One who died for us and give an account of our thoughts, words, motives, and deeds (1 Cor. 3:10-15). Jesus will examine the works of His people to determine their rewards.

God places the deeds of believers in two categories (1 Co 3:12). The first, our godly works, are represented as gold, silver, and precious stones. The second, our self-produced works, are represented as wood, hay, and stubble.

All our works will be tried by fire. Paul wrote, "Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is" (1 Co 3:13). Our godly works will survive the fire; our self-produced works will not.

We will gain reward for our godly works (1 Cor. 3:14) and lose rewards for our self-produced works (1 Cor. 3:15).

The loss of rewards does not bring loss of salvation. Paul wrote, "he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire" (1 Cor. 3:15 emphasis added).

Ne 3:32 And between the going up of the corner unto the sheep gate repaired the goldsmiths and the merchants.

The chapter ends where it began, with the sheep gate. As we will see, the job was not yet finished.

The names of some of those who worked on the wall are given.

The "goldsmiths" were those who worked at refining metals of any sort, but especially gold. The "merchants" were those who traveled selling their goods.

Nehemiah did not list the gate of Ephraim or the prison gate here but mentioned them later (8:16 and 12:39). Perhaps these two gates needed no repair.

The repair of the wall and gates was not an easy task.

It required concern (Ezra 10:1; Neh. 1:4; Ps. 137:1). Those laboring had to care. Those who did not care did not work. So it is with our service to the Lord. Those without a burden do little for God.

It required care. Careful attention had to be paid to each and every part of the wall and gates. One weak spot would give access to the enemy. Our enemy is seeking our weak spot (1 Pet. 5:8). Is it any wonder we are told to put on the "whole" armor of God (Eph. 6:11, 13).

It required commitment (1 Cor. 15:58; Gal. 6:9; Col. 3:23). The task was difficult, so those who labored had to be willing to keep going when it wasn't easy. In like

fashion, serving God can be difficult. Paul tells us to "be not weary in well doing" (2 Th. 3:13).

It required cooperation (Acts 2:42, 46; 11:23). They all had to work together. If they turned on each other, the job would never be completed. The early church was a perfect example of God's people working together (Acts 2:42, 44, 46).

The list in this chapter speaks well of Nehemiah and those who worked on the wall. But, as we are about to see, the job was not yet complete, and there would be opposition.

CHAPTER FOUR

10. THE PROTESTS 4:1-23

In chapter four, Sanballat and Tobiah do their best to stop Nehemiah and the Jews from repairing the wall. Nehemiah and those working on the wall did not let these protests hinder their work. We see the God-given wisdom of Nehemiah in action. He knew he needed God and man to get the job done. So, he relied heavily on prayer and faith. So is the life of a believer. You should pray as though only God can and work as though only you can.

Ne 4:1 But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews.

Notice, Nehemiah called God's people "the Jews" here. After the Babylonian captivity, the terms "Jew" and "Israelite" are used interchangeably. The New Testament uses the word "Jew" 22 times, and "Israelite" 2 times.

The work on the wall continued, but so did the opposition from the enemy.

Sanballat was angry about the repair of the wall. The word "wroth" means "to blaze up". His anger was like a raging forest fire.

First, Sanballat opposed the project because he hated the Jews. He hated the Jews because they were not like him. In like fashion, the world opposes God's people because they are different. Jesus tells us the world hates us because we are not of the world (Jn. 15:18-19). That tells us a believer should be different than the world. The modern belief that the church needs to be like the world to reach the world is totally unbiblical.

Second, Sanballat opposed the rebuilding because he was the governor of Samaria. One of the main roads going north and south went through both Samaria and Jerusalem. He knew the rebuilt wall would bring prosperity to Jerusalem and draw commerce away from Samaria.

He knew the prosperity of Jerusalem would mean he would lose some of his power and authority. That was the last thing he wanted. In like fashion, our enemy fears losing control.

So, he did what so many do: he "mocked" those he opposed. The word "mocked" means "to deride". He used a sarcastic tone when he spoke. Interestingly, the word carries with it the idea of speaking unintelligibly. He was like the person who gets so angry that they slur their speech as they try to talk. As I have said earlier, those who have no basis for their argument will often turn to mockery of those

they disagree with.

Interestingly, Nehemiah and Sanballat, though absolute enemies, were both under the authority of the same king (King Artaxerxes).

Nehemiah was doing what he was doing (rebuilding the wall) under the direction and authority of King Artaxerxes.

Sanballat, being the governor of Samaria, was also under the authority of king Artaxerxes. He could do only what the king allowed him to do. In like fashion, God allows the devil to work but He limits his power (Job 1:12; 2:6).

In like fashion, the believer and the devil are both under the authority of the same King. Believers operate under the authority of the King of the universe. And, the devil, like Sanballat, can talk big, but he is also under the authority of our King. God is LORD over all.

Ne 4:2 And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?

Sanballat must have gathered the "army of Samaria" to assist in his fight against Nehemiah and the Jews. In the presence of his "brethren" (friends who agreed with him) and his army, Sanballat asked questions that ridiculed those working on the wall.

Interestingly, Sanballat tried the same type of tactics the devil uses. No doubt, there was more involved with this attack than just the men who were speaking. The devil is always involved when there is opposition to God's work.

Sanballat used the words "will they" four time in this one verse.

Sanballat mockingly asked how the Jews would be able to rebuild the wall.

First, he called them these "feeble" Jews. The word means "to droop" and means "to be weak or sickly". The fact is, he was more right about this point than he realized. The Jews were weak, but their God was strong.

The word "fortify" means "to loosen". I believe Sanballat was asking if the Jews were foolish enough to believe they could free themselves from his power over them.

The devil wants believers to focus on their weakness. He fears that we might remember that, even though we are weak, our God is strong. When we lose our focus on our Lord, we are in trouble. When Peter got his eyes off of Jesus, he sank (Mt. 14:30).

I believe the words "will they sacrifice" are the ones that sealed Sanballat's doom. He was saying, Will their offering sacrifices and praying to their God do any good? His mocking the Jews was one thing, but now he was mocking the God of the Jews. No one gets away with that.

When he asked "will they revive the stones" he was asking if the Jews would magically make the broken stones whole again.

Sanballat's comment about finishing in a "day" suggests the Jews had no idea what they were doing.

In other words, Sanballat was trying to convince Nehemiah, and the Jews, that the job was impossible. The devil does the same with a believer. His greatest fear is that a believer might believe, and obey, God. He knows such a person can do great damage to his work on earth.

Sanballat could talk all he wanted, but he could not force Nehemiah to do his bidding. The devil, like Sanballat, will try to scare the believer, but he cannot control the believer. He has no power over us other than that which we allow him to have.

Ne 4:3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall.

Sanballat's sidekick, Tobiah, was quick to add his two cents' worth. He sarcastically said the wall would be so weak that a fox walking on it would break it down.

Tobiah was wrong in at least two ways.

First, he was wrong about the strength of the wall. What God does is always done right.

Second, he was wrong about it being "their" wall. This was God's project and God's wall. Realizing we are a part of God's work should give us the courage we need to do His will.

It is vitally important that we do not miss the intentions of Sanballat and Tobiah. They mocked the Jews and made fun of their work, but they were wanting to stop what God was doing. The devil will use many tactics against believers, but his goal is to stop God. As believers, we need to keep that in mind. The battle is not about us, it's about God and His work being accomplished in our lives and in the world around us.

Ne 4:4 Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity:

As was Nehemiah's habit, he turned to God in prayer. His prayer intensified. When the enemy intensifies his attack, we need to intensify our prayer. Jesus prayed "more earnestly" in Gethsemane (Lk. 22:44). The devil attacked Him that night as never before.

Nehemiah needed to tune out the voices of criticism from those who opposed him and, at the same time, tune in to the voice of God. That isn't easy, for there are times when it seems like the world is screaming while God is whispering.

Nehemiah asked the Lord to "Hear". Once again, we see how he is trusting God for what was needed.

Nehemiah's prayer reveals four things.

One, Nehemiah's prayer revealed a problem *v.4a "we are despised"*

The word "despised" means "to loathe". Nehemiah's problem was the fact that Sanballat, and those working with him, hated him and everything he wanted to do.

Nehemiah recognized Sanballat and his followers for what they were. He knew they despised the Jews and their God. Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and all their followers hated everything Nehemiah and the Jews stood for.

Nehemiah saw the intentions of the enemy. We had better recognize the intentions of our enemy, the devil. He wants to kill, steal, and destroy (Jn. 10:10). Playing games with that type of enemy is foolish and deadly.

Two, Nehemiah's prayer revealed a power *v.4b "turn their reproach"*

Nehemiah's prayer revealed his faith and dependence in God's power. He knew his God was stronger than the enemy and, therefore, he had no reason to fear.

Nehemiah was praying from a place of power, not weakness.

Addressing God as "our God" shows us that Nehemiah saw God as being on his side. He was not alone, and he knew it. Knowing God is fighting for you makes the battle a lot easier.

To "turn their reproach" means to cause their plan to backfire. Nehemiah was asking that God would do to them what they wanted to do to the Jews.

Give them "prey in the land of captivity" means to let them become prisoners to their enemies and let them waste away in bondage.

Three, Nehemiah's prayer revealed a promise
v.4c "turn their reproach upon their own head"

Nehemiah knew God had promised not only to bless the Jews but to curse those who cursed the Jews (Gen. 12:3). He knew God's promises. The foundation of our prayers should be the promises God has given us.

Provoked "thee to anger" shows us that Nehemiah's focus was on the fact that the enemy was attacking his God. It wasn't about him; it was about his God.

Ne 4:5 And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders.

Nehemiah was asking God not to ignore their sin. He was asking God not to forgive their sin. This seems too harsh at first glance, but we must remember that Nehemiah is praying this while the enemy was still actively opposing God and His work. There were no signs of them repenting. If there were repentance and confession, Nehemiah would not have prayed in this manner.

The words "the builders" remind us that even though the battle was between God and those who opposed Him, Nehemiah and those who were helping him were also in the battle. As believers, we have been brought into a battle between God and the devil. If we don't fight, we will suffer the consequences.

Like Nehemiah, we need to see the devil as our enemy. The solution to dealing with an enemy is warfare, not conversation or compromise. We are told to "fight" (1 Tim. 6:12; 1 Cor. 9:26), "war" (1 Tim. 1:18; 2 Cor. 10:3), strive (1 Cor. 9:25), be strong (Eph. 6:10), wrestle (Eph. 6:12), contend (Jude 3), put on our armor (Eph. 6:11), and endure hardness as a good soldier (2 Tim. 2:3).

Four, Nehemiah's prayer revealed a plan *v.5d "before the builders"*

Nehemiah understood the fact that God was using him and those who were working with him to accomplish His will. They were a part of God's plan for that time.

God has a plan for now, for here, for us. We need to get in line with Him and let Him do that which He desires.

Nehemiah also understood that Sanballat and his followers were opposing God's plan. Their hatred for God caused them to oppose anything and everything God was doing.

His prayer was the result of his overwhelming desire to see God work in his lifetime. As we have mentioned, very few during that day had this type of desire. And so it is in our day.

A closer look at Nehemiah's prayer

Comparing Nehemiah's prayer to some comments we find in the New Testament can be confusing. Jesus said we should pray for and be good to our enemies (Mt. 5:44). Paul said we are to bless (Rom. 12:14) and feed our enemies (Rom. 12:20). Yet, Nehemiah's prayer seems to be doing the opposite.

Nehemiah's prayer is an imprecatory prayer. An imprecatory prayer is a prayer that asks for God's judgment to come upon a guilty party. Psalms 5, 10, 17, 35, 58, 59, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, and 140 contain imprecatory prayers.

Nehemiah's prayer reminds us, that even though we, like God, are to be merciful and forgiving, we cannot, and should not, ignore sin.

1. An imprecatory prayer is not from a heart seeking revenge.

God repeatedly tells us not to strike back or seek revenge (Lev. 19:18; 24:17-19; Mt. 6:15; Rom. 12:14, 17, 19, 21).

2. An imprecatory prayer comes from the heart of someone who sees sin as God does.

Sin causes great hardship in this world, and innocent people are often the ones who suffer the greatest. Sin dishonors God, ruins lives, destroys families, and sends people to hell.

3. An imprecatory prayer comes from God's point of view about the disobedience of mankind.

They are prayers for God's justice against those who have violated His Law.

4. An imprecatory prayer defends those who have been wronged.

Most of the time, if not all the time, we find imprecatory prayers in the Bible, they deal with someone who has sinned against God and His people.

5. An imprecatory prayer recognizes the positive results that come from God's judgment.

As bad as it sounds, it would have been much better had Hitler died as a baby in his crib.

6. An imprecatory prayer does not disregard God's mercy and grace.

Though their focus is primarily on the judgment and justice of God, grace is available for those who will accept it, repent, and turn to God.

With that thought in mind, we need to pray earnestly for those who oppose God's word and will (1 Tim. 2:1). We should want them to get saved and repent of their ungodly deeds (2 Pet. 3:9). We should pray that God would convict and convert those who are in sin.

Ne 4:6 So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.

v.6a So built we the wall ...

Nehemiah prayed, and then he went back to work. Notice how little time he spent thinking about the enemy. Only two verses. He did not ignore the enemy, that would have been foolish and deadly. He acknowledged he had an enemy, turned them over to God, and went back to work.

Nehemiah waited when it was time to wait (1:4; 2:11), and worked when it was time to work. God told Joshua to get up because it was time to do something (Josh. 7:10-15). We make a mess when we pray, when it is time to work, or work when it is time to pray.

v.6b ... and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof:

They reached the halfway point. Halfway is always a difficult place. The workers were tired from their labor, but realized the wall was a long way from being completed. Halfway is long enough from the start to get a person tired and far enough from the end to get them discouraged.

v.6c ... for the people had a mind to work.

They had reached the halfway point in a relatively short time because the people had a "mind to work". They had put their heart into the project, and they believed in what they were doing. I'm sure Nehemiah was pleased with the progress thus far.

We must not forget the fact that God was assisting them. All the ingenuity that man can muster is nothing without God.

Ne 4:7-8 But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it.

Despite the insults of Sanballat and his allies, the "wall" was "made up" and the "breaches began to be stopped". The rapid progress on the wall made Sanballat even more angry. Our enemy gets angry when God's work progresses (Rev. 12:12, 17).

Sanballat's mocking had not worked, so he took his attack a step further. They moved from mocking to making plans to attack.

Sanballat convinced the Arabians, Ammonites, and Ashdodites to join their attack on the Jews. They determined to use a sudden and unexpected military attack against the workers on the wall.

No doubt, they believed the unfinished wall would give them access into Jerusalem and an easy victory. The devil looks for our weak spot. For this reason, we are admonished to put on the "whole" armor of God (Eph. 6:11, 13).

Their desire, and their goal, was to "hinder" the reconstruction of the wall.

Interestingly, Sanballat and his allies never attacked. They hoped their threat would frighten the Jews enough to make them give up and quit. Quite often, those things we worry about the most never happen.

Fear can be a tremendous weapon, and the devil uses it quite successfully. When God is with us, there is nothing to fear. The words "fear not" are found 63 times in the Bible. God spoke to His people and said, "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: Be not dismayed; for I am thy God:" (Isa. 41:1). Knowing He is our God should remove all fear.

Ne 4:9 Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.

The word "Nevertheless" is a tremendous word. Despite all the threats from a fortified enemy, Nehemiah did not let fear control him. The faith that had carried him this far would carry him to the finish. May the Lord give us the same spirit. We are to walk by faith (2 Cor. 5:7).

Nehemiah, knowing that the additional forces of the enemy were a serious problem, did what he always did: he prayed, and he got the Jews to pray.

There will be times we can do nothing about our problem, and prayer will be all we have. We should not feel helpless in such cases. Prayer is us depending on

the God who can do what we cannot do. Prayer is not us throwing up our hands and hoping something good will happen. Prayer is trusting the Almighty, all-knowing, all-powerful God of the universe to do what He can do.

However, Nehemiah could do more than pray, and he did. He put watchmen on the wall day and night. Nehemiah prayed and worked (v. 4-6), but he also prayed and watched (v. 8-9).

Prayer is not an excuse for not taking action. When we can do something, we should. God does not bless our inactivity. God told Moses to stop praying and do what He had told him to do (Ex. 14:15). God said "Get thee up" to Joshua (Josh. 7:10), and "Arise" to Ezra (Ezra 10:4).

The watch being set "day and night" tells us two things.

First, it tells us there was no time when they could let down their guard. Our battle is constant, and the attack of the devil never lessens.

Second, it tells us the Jews were dedicated to the task. It takes spiritual dedication to keep standing when the battle never lets up and there is no time to relax. If our enemy keeps attacking, we must keep standing.

The words "because of them" tell us Nehemiah had analyzed his enemy and took the necessary steps to defend himself from them. Knowing our enemy is half the battle. Paul said, "We are not ignorant of his devices" (2 Cor. 2:11).

Ne 4:10 And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall.

Nehemiah had his eye on the enemy, but he was watching the workers also. He realized they were physically exhausted from the labor but mentally exhausted from the threat of the enemy. A good leader understands the importance of caring for those who are following.

Those in the tribe of "Judah" expressed their concern about the condition of the laborers. The tribe of Judah would be considered the strongest of all the tribes. Great men like David, Solomon, Nehemiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jesus came from this tribe.

Such disheartening news coming from this tribe could be especially discouraging. It isn't a surprise when the weakest church members complain about the difficulty of doing God's will, but when the strongest members make such comments, you know you have a problem.

Discouragement from without is one thing, discouragement from within is quite another.

The "strength" of the laborers "is decayed" means they were becoming weak. This was to no fault of their own; they were human, and humans have limitations. The task was beginning to wear them down. As I mentioned in verse six, at the halfway point, the workers were weary, but there was still much work to be done.

It would be worse to quit now than to never have begun. If they gave up now, they would lose what they have accomplished.

The "rubbish" (debris) from the broken wall was so abundant that it made it difficult to work. The debris from the broken wall was there, but, as we would imagine, it had also been used, especially by those who lived near the wall, as a place to throw their trash for the approximate 170 years since Nebuchadnezzar attacked. Nehemiah was right when he said there was "much" rubbish. To remove tons of rubble with baskets and lifting large stones by hand was an

astronomical task

Their enemy, rightly so, believed the debris would assist them in their fight against Nehemiah. Our enemy recognizes that also. If we allow him, the devil will fill our lives with things that hinder us from doing God's will.

Anyone who has ever remodeled a house knows you have to get rid of the old to give you room to build the new. The same is true spiritually. We are to put off the old man, and then put on the new (Col. 3:9-10). The Holy Spirit in us can not work until the old man is dealt with.

Anyone who has done reconstruction will tell you it is much more difficult than construction. Whether upholstering a sofa, remodeling a house, or restoring a car, reconstruction is difficult because you first have to tear out the old.

Ne 4:11 And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease.

To make matters worse, at what was probably the lowest point of the project, the enemy promised an attack but gave no details about when and how they would do it. The pressure of knowing an attack could come at any moment had to weigh heavily on the weary workers.

I wonder, were Sanballat and his bunch watching the rebuilding of the wall? Did they see how the laborers were slowing down and realize they were getting weary? Is this why they planned this attack at this particular time?

Of course, we do not know how informed Sanballat was, but we do know our adversary is keeping a close watch on us. He will attack us at our lowest point. He is looking for the one he "may" devour (1 Pet. 5:8).

Notice the words, "They shall not know, neither see". The surprise attack is the most dangerous, and usually, the most successful. For this reason, the believer must always be on guard and ready for an attack at any moment.

And "slay them". Sanballat meant business. He wasn't planning to just stop the wall; he was planning to kill all the workers.

Ne 4:12 And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you.

This is a difficult verse to interpret.

We do know that the "Jews which dwelt by them" were the Jews who lived close by. They were Jews who had lived in the same neighborhoods as those who were now attacking Nehemiah and the workers.

The words, "From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you", mean the enemy was threatening to attack when and where the Jews least expected it". From "all places" means there was no safe place and no place to hide.

We do not know whether these Jews were friend or foe.

If they were friends, it meant they were Jews who had remained faithful to God through the years and were now standing with Nehemiah. It means they had gotten close enough to the enemy that they could spy on them and get information to help Nehemiah.

If this is the case, they were trying to warn Nehemiah and encourage the workers on the wall to keep working.

What a blessing to have this type of person on your side. Thank the Lord for those who remain godly in the midst of a perverted world (Phil. 2:15).

If they were foes, it meant they were Jews who had turned away from God and become friends with their ungodly neighbors and joined forces with the enemy. It means they got this information because they had become friends and joined forces with the enemy.

If this is the case, they were trying to convince the workers on the wall to desert the project and go back to their homes.

What a disappointment this type of person would be. There are way too many believers who have given in to the temptation of the world around them and become more of a burden than a blessing to the body of Christ.

The "ten times" refers to how these individual Jews came one by one to give the same message. Imagine how difficult it would be to have them coming one after the other, with the threat of an attack by the enemy.

Ne 4:13 Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

The rest of the chapter tells us about the eleven things Nehemiah did to counter the enemy's attack.

One, Nehemiah adjusted his strategy to fit the attack. (v.13a)

The word "Therefore" means Nehemiah did something because of what had just happened. He, like all those in a battle, had to make decisions on the spur of the moment.

A soldier must be ready to adapt to the situation even while in the midst of battle. Paul said, "we are not ignorant of his devices" (2 Cor. 2:11). We must be equipped for the many strategies of the devil. We must put on the whole armor of God if we are going to be able to stand (Eph. 6:11).

Two, Nehemiah placed men at the "lower" parts of the wall. (v.13b)

The "lower" part of the wall would be the place most likely to receive the first part of the enemy's attack. No doubt, Nehemiah put the most faithful in this position, for this wasn't a place for the weak or halfhearted. Those defending this part of the wall had to be ready for the strongest and most equipped of the enemy.

Three, Nehemiah placed men at the "higher" parts of the wall. (v.13c)

These men were to be ready for any of the enemy who made it past the first line (lower places) of defense. Those of the enemy who would make it to this point would be the strongest and the most determined. To get to this point, they would have had to fight their way past the Jews defending the lower part of the wall.

When we allow our enemy to gain one victory, he will attempt to gain another.

Four, Nehemiah set "families" together. (v.13d)

Nehemiah knew they would fight harder when the lives of their family members were at stake. Family takes care of family.

All believers should see themselves as a part of the family of God. We are not in this battle alone, and our victory or defeat has consequences on more than ourselves.

This should remind us also of how everyone is a part of the battle. Young, old, or in between, the enemy had mercy on no one.

Five, Nehemiah made sure they had the necessary weapons (v.13e)

Nehemiah put them into position with "their swords, their spears, and their bows". He made sure they were not defenseless against the enemy.

God does not leave the believer defenseless against our enemy. He provides every believer the armor necessary for victory (Eph. 6:12-18). The belt of truth (v.14) protects us from the lies of the devil. The breastplate of righteousness (v.14) refers to the righteousness of Christ working through us to do right. Our feet shod with the gospel of peace (v.15) means we march on proclaiming the gospel as we go. The shield of faith (v.16) speaks of us, by faith, believing God and His word. The helmet of salvation (v.17) speaks of us thinking right and protecting our minds from the devil's lies. The sword of the Spirit (v. 17) speaks of us using the Word as Jesus did (Mt. 4:4, 7, 10). Consistent and believing prayer is also essential for our victory (v. 18).

Ne 4:14 And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.

Six, Nehemiah gathered the Jews together to encourage them. (v.14)

The message of an imminent attack must have smitten the Jews with fear. Recognizing this fear, Nehemiah gathered them together in an effort to encourage them. He did not panic; he trusted God and listened to His direction.

He encouraged them by reminding them not to be afraid.

As is so often the case under these types of situations, the message was "Be not ye afraid". The words "fear not", or their equivalent, are the most repeated command in the Bible. Some have mistakenly said the words "fear not" are found 365 times in the Bible. Actually, the words "be not afraid", "fear not", or "fear ye not" are found a total of 99 times.

God has not given us a spirit of fear (2 Tim. 1:7). Fear comes from Satan or self, not from the Savior. Fear will bind us and hinder the work of God in our lives if we allow it. Jesus asked his disciples, "Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith" (Mk. 4:40). That tells us fear is the opposite of faith. It also tells us faith is the remedy for fear.

He encouraged them by reminding them they were fighting for their families and their possessions. As I have mentioned, fighting for family takes the battle to a totally different level of intensity.

He encouraged them by reminding them to "remember the Lord".

Nehemiah's battle cry was "remember the Lord". It was a cry to remember victory. When encouraging Timothy to be a good soldier, Paul told him to "Remember" Jesus Christ and his resurrection (2 Tim. 2:8). Looking back to Jesus' victory on the cross should encourage modern believers to stand while in the midst of the battle. Jesus didn't quit, neither should we. He won, and so can we.

Ne 4:15 And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work.

Seeing the Jews making the steps to defend themselves must have alerted the enemy to their readiness to fight. They had expected an easy victory, but when they realized they had a real fight on their hands, they began to back off.

Nehemiah was quick to say, "God had brought their council to nought". As always, he gave the credit to God.

The Jews had won a victory, but the war was far from over. They all "returned" to the wall, and everyone went back "unto his work". Every person found their place and kept doing what they were supposed to do.

This is a perfect picture of the body of Christ. Each member doing what they were designed and equipped to do in the body (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 20).

Ne 4:16 And it came to pass from that time forth, that the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers were behind all the house of Judah.

Seven, Nehemiah divided the people to accomplish the best strategy. (v.16)

The words "from that time forth" tell us Nehemiah was still adjusting his strategy as the circumstances demanded.

One half were to work and the other half were to ready themselves for an attack by arming themselves. They were working and warring, constructing and combating, building and battling. It may have been that these would switch positions at certain intervals.

The "habergeons" were coats of mail. Goliath wore one (1 Sam. 17:5). It was a coat-like piece of protective armor made of interlinked metal rings. Its design made it especially helpful against swords and spears.

The "rulers", who were the captains or persons in charge, stood behind watching the battle, encouraging the men, giving instructions, and assisting in the fight when needed. Having this type of watchman would be so helpful.

Ne 4:17 They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon.

The phrase about one hand working and the other fighting is not meant to be taken literally. Of course, both hands would be needed for both work and battle. It simply means they were equally dedicated to both. The next verse tells us they had a sword at their side as they labored.

This certainly reminds us of how believers are to build and battle. We are warriors and workers for the cause of Christ.

Those who "bare burdens" were those who carried the wood, stones, and mortar to those who were building. In the construction business, they are called laborers. They may or may not be trained to construct the building, but the building would never be completed without them.

Paul said we are "labourers together" (1 Cor. 3:8). He called those who assisted him "fellowlabourers" (Phil.2:25, Phi. 1:24). Jesus tells us to pray that the Lord of the harvest will send forth laborers (Mt. 9:38).

The battle will not be over until the building is complete. We will have to fight until we have finished the job God has given us. Paul said he had "fought a good fight" and "finished" his course (2 Tim. 4:7). He did not do one until he had done the other.

Eight, Nehemiah brought a trumpeter along with him.

Ne 4:18 For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me.

By keeping a sword by their side as they worked, they were ready to work or fight.

Realizing the distance between workers made communication difficult, Nehemiah kept a trumpeter to his side.

Nine, Nehemiah moved the people closer together.

Ne 4:19 And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another.

Nehemiah made sure to communicate with all the people, no matter their position or function. From top to bottom, everyone needs to be on the same page.

He spoke of the distance between one working group and the other.

Ne 4:20 In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us.

Nehemiah realized communication was vital. The distance between the workers made the trumpet especially important. Different sounds on the trumpet communicated different commands. When the workers heard the trumpet, they were to stop their work and come to its sound. The trumpet's sound rallied the people to one place and for one purpose.

Nehemiah reassured them that their God would fight for them. They were not, and neither are we, alone in the fight. God's people can rest assured that the LORD will fight for them (Ex. 14:14; Dt. 1:30; 3:22).

Ne 4:21 So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared.

They labored from sunup to sundown.

Ten, Nehemiah moved the people inside the city.

Ne 4:22 Likewise at the same time said I unto the people, Let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us, and labour on the day.

Those who lived outside the city were not to stay inside and did not go home. Not having to travel from their homes to Jerusalem every day gave them more time to work on the wall.

Keeping the workers together night and day made them feel more like family and was an encouragement to them all.

Ne 4:23 So neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing.

Their alertness is seen in that they did not take time to take off their clothes to sleep. They were ready for an attack twenty-four hours a day. As I have mentioned, there is no time to relax our guard in this fight against our enemy. He doesn't rest, so neither can we. Only God can give us the stamina we need to stand continually.

Eleven, Nehemiah was a good example.

He and the people worked so diligently that they did not even take time to change clothes, except to wash them. He did not ask the people to do anything he was not willing to do himself. His example encouraged the people to do whatever it took to accomplish the goal.

CHAPTER FIVE

11. THE POVERTY 5:1-19

Chapter four ended on a positive note, with victory, but things were about to change. In chapter five, Nehemiah was faced with an unexpected problem that had the potential of stopping the rebuilding of the wall. Some believe this should not be in this location in this book, but in life, big problems come during big problems quite often.

The problem was a family problem

This problem came not from the foe without, but the family within.

Ne 5:1 And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews.

The fact that the "wives" are mentioned speaks of the severity of the problem. Usually, the wives were kept in the background with such matters, but this was a problem that affected entire families.

This problem came not from Sanballat but from the "brethren the Jews". Two things happened when the workers started fighting each other.

One, they stopped standing against the enemy. When they started fighting with each other, they stopped fighting for each other.

Two, they stopped working on the wall. The work of God is always hindered when God's people are not unified.

That means, they stopped doing the two things that should have been most important to them. These were certainly the two most important things to God. It also meant defeat was certain unless they found a way to take care of this problem. It was no small matter.

The problem was a financial problem

As we will see, this problem had to do with the personal finances of some who were working on the wall. The extreme financial problems had caused the poor Jews to borrow money from their rich fellow Jews. However, the wealthy Jews who lent the money charged extreme interest. They had taken advantage of their fellow Jews while they were in a desperate situation.

The gap between the rich and the poor has been a constant problem throughout the history of mankind. The rich oppressing the poor and the poor demanding handouts is an enormous problem in our day.

There are three groups of people involved in this situation. They are discussed in the next three verses.

Ne 5:2 For there were that said, We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore we take up corn for them, that we may eat, and live.

The first group was those who lived near, or in, cities where they could not grow their own food. They depended on jobs to provide the money to buy their necessities.

Coming to work on the wall meant they were away from their jobs and their salaries. Without their regular salary, they found themselves in great and sudden financial hardship.

The fact that the Jews usually had large families with many "sons" and "daughters" made the problem even worse. The larger the family, the higher the costs.

Ne 5:3 Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth.

The second group was those who owned land and were able to grow most of the food they ate. However, a famine (dearth) had reduced their harvest, which required them to buy their food instead of growing it.

Some of them were forced to mortgage their property to raise the money to buy grain for food. Now, they had mortgaged their land and did not have the money to pay for the loan.

Ne 5:4 There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards.

The third group was those who had been forced to mortgage their land to pay their taxes.

The "king's tribute" refers to the taxes the people had to pay for their "lands and vineyards". As we well understand, the taxes kept coming whether they were working or not. Already being in such a financial bind, they had to borrow money to pay their taxes.

The king wasn't concerned with the struggles of the people; he wanted the benefit of their taxes, no matter how difficult their circumstances.

Ne 5:5 Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards.

This verse tells us all three groups were complaining about their difficult situation.

Our "flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children" means there was no difference between them and the rest of the Jews. In other words, they had done nothing to cause the problems they were enduring. Their lack of finances, nor the famine, was not God's judgment for some wrong they had done. Many of the problems that we face are not our fault and are beyond our control.

Bringing "into bondage our sons and daughters to be servants" means that they had sold their children into slavery because they were not able to provide for their basic necessities. This shows the severity of the situation. These were not uncaring parents; they loved their children and would have gladly given their own lives for them. Selling them into slavery, as bad as it was, was better than letting them die of starvation. It was slavery or death.

They had sold their children and were not able to buy them back (redeem) because they had mortgaged their "lands and vineyards" which were their only means of income.

They were in worse condition here than when they were in bondage in Babylon. The one difference is that the bondage of Babylon was caused by an ungodly king; this bondage was caused by their fellow Jews.

Looking at this aspect of the building project brings a question to my mind. Did some of the family members of those who had left their homes to work on the wall come and ask them to come back home? Did a wife beg her husband to come back to work their farm and provide for his family? Did little children cry for

their daddy to come home? We have no information to suggest this, but it certainly seems to me to be a possibility. How difficult it would have been to continue working on the wall if it did happen.

Ne 5:6 And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words.

Nehemiah was right to be "very angry" for at least three reasons. One, because the greed of the Jews had taken advantage of their fellow Jews. Two, because their actions were causing problems among the family of God. Three, because their actions caused a problem that was hindering the rebuilding of the wall. They had been making such wonderful progress, and now it was stopped because of the love of money.

The attack from the outside was bad enough, but the problem from within made it much worse.

The problem was a fixable problem

The situation was dire, but not beyond repair. God can fix any problem if His people will do what He says.

Ne 5:7 Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them.

Nehemiah "consulted" with himself, which means he spent a great deal of thought about the matter. Notice, he did not respond while he was angry. He waited, no doubt prayed, and thought it over before he did anything.

If Nehemiah was fearful or intimidated, he did not show it, and it certainly did not keep him from doing what needed to be done. There will be times when we have to do what is right, even if we are afraid.

He called an "assembly" to discuss the matter publicly and expose their sin before all. By handling it in this manner, the entire group would be witnesses. There are times when rebuking in public is right (Dt. 13:11; 17:13; 19:20). Paul wrote, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Tim. 5:20).

Nehemiah "rebuked the nobles, and the rulers" and said, "Ye exact usury".

The word "usury" means "interest on a loan". Some have suggested the word always implies an overcharging of interest. The fact is, the Bible's use of usury refers to any interest charged on a loan, whether that interest is excessive or reasonable.

The Bible does not forbid interest in general. A Jew could charge interest on a loan to a foreigner (Dt. 23:20). However, a Jew was forbidden from charging another Jew interest (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-38; Dt. 15:7-8; 23:19-20). No brother should gain from another brother's hardship.

Nehemiah rebuked the nobles and rulers because they had charged interest of their fellow Jews. That means, a Jew was swindling a "brother". The rich had taken advantage of the poor at a truly vulnerable time, and it would be wrong to let it go unpunished.

Oppression of the poor is especially displeasing to God (Amos 2:6; 5:12, 8:4-8; Pro. 14:31; 22:16; 28:3; Jam. 5:1-6). God said, "Ye shall not therefore oppress one another; but thou shalt fear thy God: for I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 25:17).

A word of warning, borrowing money can put us in bondage. The Bible says the borrower is servant to the lender (Pro. 22:7). How we handle our finances tells us a lot about our spiritual condition.

Ne 5:8 And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer.

After much prayer and thought, Nehemiah realized he needed to confront the problem head-on.

He compared their greed to how he had personally paid to redeem some of the Jews who had lost their freedom while they were captive in Babylon. He used himself as an example to illustrate the severity of the sin.

Nehemiah's words left them speechless.

Ne 5:9 Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?

Nehemiah told them that what they had done was "not good".

Nehemiah explained how he had behaved while in this building project. He did so, not to boast or call attention to himself, but to show his fellow Jews how God had taken care of those who are willing to walk by faith and obedience.

This reminds me of a car license plate I saw on a very nice, very expensive car, that read, "I-TITHE". The owner of that plate was demonstrating by example that God is good to those who trust and obey Him.

Their abuse of the poor showed they did not "fear" God.

Their actions had not only put themselves into a difficult situation, but it had brought "reproach" to the name of their God. It brought reproach to God because they, being the family of God, were fighting with each other. It brought reproach to God because some of them had selfishly swindled others. It brought reproach because it made it appear that the God who brought them out of the Babylonian Captivity could not take care of their daily necessities.

Ne 5:10 I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, let us leave off this usury.

Nehemiah said he and his co-workers were in a position where they could have easily done what the oppressors did. He could have taken advantage of the situation, lent money to the needy, and made a great profit.

If anyone had the right to benefit from the building project, it was Nehemiah. He had given up more than any of those involved. We will see later (5:14-15) that he did not so much as take what was justly his.

With the words, "let us leave off this usury", Nehemiah was saying, if he did right, they should also.

Ne 5:11 Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them.

Feeling bad or being sorry for their wrongdoing was not enough. They were to return the property and the money they had gained by usury. Restitution is a Biblical principle, but one that is pretty much forgotten in our day. Having to pay back what is stolen is a deterrent to crime.

The "hundredth part", which equals 12%, was probably the amount the poor had to pay each month on their loans.

Ne 5:12 Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise.

The people's response is nothing short of amazing. They admitted their wrong without showing any sign of anger or resentment towards Nehemiah. They simply said they would make it right.

Their positive response could be attributed to two things. One, the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. The Holy Spirit can break hearts when needed (Acts 5:38; 9:6; 16:31; 22:10; 24:26). Two, Nehemiah's attitude. More than likely, he spoke the truth in love when he addressed those who were guilty (Eph. 4:15). Confronting in love will accomplish more than rebuking in a hostile manner.

Even though the entire congregation was present, Nehemiah called the "priests" to serve as witnesses of the promise.

Ne 5:13 Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the LORD. And the people did according to this promise.

Nehemiah shook the lap of his garment as an illustration of what would happen to anyone who did not keep their promise. He knew how easy it was to break a promise. He made it clear that God would hold them to their promise. He understood the importance of accountability.

The word "shaken" means "to toss up and down". It is translated with the word "overthrew" when describing what God did to the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:27; Ps. 136:15).

The word "emptied" means "to pour out". It is used to describe how they dumped out the sacks of Joseph's brothers (Gen. 42:35). No doubt, they picked up their sacks, turned them over, and violently dumped out their contents. Interestingly, the same word is used to describe how God will dump out a blessing to those who give their offerings (Mal. 3:10). The God who can dump out justice is just as willing to dump out blessings.

All the congregation was present, so the sin of the oppressors became public knowledge.

The word "Amen" means "so be it". They were all in agreement.

They "praised the LORD". Those who had been oppressed praised the Lord for their deliverance. Those who had oppressed praised the Lord for their forgiveness and freedom from guilt. The forgiveness of sin is just reason to rejoice.

Most importantly, the people did as they had promised. Had they not, the result would have been disastrous. The most important result would have been that the wall would not have been completed.

Ne 5:14 Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor.

Nehemiah served as Judah's governor for 12 years (Artaxerxes' 20th to 32nd year).

One of the benefits of serving as governor was a food allowance provided by the Persian government. Nehemiah refused these benefits. We will discover later (5:17) that he also provided meals for 150 Jews at his own expense. He trusted God and refused to depend on man.

Ne 5:15 But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God.

The "former governors" who had served before Nehemiah, unlike Nehemiah, had gladly taken whatever the Persian king gave them. They had received "bread and wine" and also "forty shekels of silver".

The words "had taken of them" means the money used for these provisions came from taxes the Jews had paid.

Forty shekels was the amount a common laborer would earn in 120 days. That means, the former governors received in one day what a laborer would receive in forty days. They were doing this from taxes from people who were having financial hardships so severe that they were having to sell their children to slavery. They deserved a salary but this was excessive to say the least. This was an excessive salary and political corruption.

On the other hand, Nehemiah refused these funds.

He said he refused them because "of the fear of God".

That means, he refused the funds because he cared about the suffering people. How could he take money from those who were suffering so greatly?

He refused the funds because he did not want to rely on anyone other than God. He trusted His God to provide.

He refused the funds because he wanted to be an example to others. What he was doing would encourage others to do the same.

He realized, as we should, that his handling of his finances revealed a great deal about his spiritual condition. His refusal of a salary shows us he was a giver. The believer who refuses to give is not spiritual, no matter what else he does. God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7).

Ne 5:16 Yea, also I continued in the work of this wall, neither bought we any land: and all my servants were gathered thither unto the work.

Nehemiah kept his focus on the wall and refused to be distracted.

As governor, he could have bought land at a cheap price and sold it later at a tremendous profit. He did not come to Jerusalem to start a real estate business; he came to serve God and do His will.

It seems that Nehemiah did not even build a house for himself. He would rather spend the time working on the wall than building himself a house.

How could he tell the Jews to give their all to the rebuilding of the wall while he was working on his own house and taking care of his own comfort?

Ne 5:17 Moreover there were at my table an hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, beside those that came unto us from among the heathen that are about us.

From his own possessions, Nehemiah provided meals for 150 Jews and an undisclosed number of others. The "Jews" would be the common folks. The "rulers" would be those who did not lack financially. And, the "heathen" refers to those from a foreign land who had come to work on the wall. All were included and none were excluded.

Ne 5:18 Now that which was prepared for me daily was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine: yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people.

It took one ox, six sheep, and several birds to provide the daily meal for Nehemiah and those he fed. All of this he paid for himself. He recognized that the "bondage was heavy" on the people, and he wanted to make their load a little lighter. He was a man of compassion.

Ne 5:19 Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

The word "Think" means "to remember". Nehemiah, without fear, asked God to remember what he had done and how he had lived. Not everyone could do that.

Nehemiah served faithfully as the governor without pay or provision from the Persian government. He not only refused to take advantage of the workers on the wall, but he gave of his own substance to provide for them. He did all this because He loved God and longed to be used by Him. This is the type of person who can say to God, "Think upon me, my God for good".

CHAPTER SIX

12. THE PRESSURE 6:1-19

In this chapter, the wall was near completion, but Sanballat refused to give up. He put constant pressure on Nehemiah in an attempt to stop the rebuilding of the wall. Fortunately, Nehemiah had the spiritual discernment to realize what Sanballat was doing.

In this chapter, Sanballat will try to discredit Nehemiah to that the workers would desert him and the work on the wall. Thankfully, he failed miserably.

Ne 6:1 Now it came to pass, when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;)

I mentioned this trio in the opening comments of this study. They were descendants of three people groups God had driven out when He gave the Promised Land to the people of Israel. Their hatred for God and the people of Israel is still evident.

The wall was nearing completion. All the gaps had been closed, but the gates were not yet finished.

Somehow, Sanballat found out about the progress on the wall. As I have mentioned previously, our enemy stays informed and is always watching.

Realizing his time was running out, Sanballat knew he needed to do something quickly. He knew a finished wall meant a strong Jerusalem. The devil will do whatever it takes to keep the believer from living a life of victory.

The wise believer knows spiritual progress will always get the attention of the devil.

Ne 6:2 That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief.

Sanballat and Geshem, also known as Gashmu (6:6), tried to pressure Nehemiah into meeting with them for a discussion. By all appearances, this looked like a friendly attempt to cooperate, compromise, and make peace.

Unfortunately, as with Sanballat, there are times when our worst enemies are those who smile and claim to be our friends. We certainly do not want to walk in constant suspicion, but we do need to be on our guard.

However, the place suggested to meet seemed suspicious. The "plain of Ono" was 25 miles northwest of the city of Jerusalem and near the land of the enemy. Asking Nehemiah to travel such a distance from Jerusalem suggested he had something devious in mind.

Fortunately, Nehemiah had the spiritual discernment to realize Sanballat meant to do his "mischief".

Discernment is one of the missing components in the lives of many believers. We need discernment to know the Lord's will, to know our own motives, and to know whether we are hearing the truth. Multitudes are being led astray by preachers who claim to be preaching the truth. For them, if it looks good and feels good, it is good.

We can develop our discernment by being sensitive to the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:13), digging into the Word of God (Heb. 5:14), and asking God (Jam. 1:5).

The word "mischief" means "to do harm or cause grief". It is the same word Joseph used when he said his brothers thought "evil" against him (Gen. 50:20). His brothers had intended to kill him, but then decided to sell him as a slave. Sanballat and Geshem would have been thrilled to kill or imprison Nehemiah. However, they were willing to settle for discrediting him. As we will see, they were trying to turn Nehemiah's allies against him.

Ne 6:3 And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?

Nehemiah knew rebuilding the wall was "great work" and that he should let nothing interrupt it. Even though much of the project was complete (6:1), he knew Jerusalem would not be safe until the gates were installed. Nothing on earth should be more important than the work of God in the lives of His people.

Nehemiah, recognizing Sanballat's intentions, refused to do as he asked. He knew he could not do what Sanballat asked and keep working on the wall at the same time. In like fashion, a believer can not live for the world and serve God at the same time. Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters" (Mt. 6:24).

The devil has distracted many churches from their primary function. Some Christian organizations that started with godly principles have allowed themselves to drift into becoming nothing more than social service agencies or thrift stores.

Way too many of God's people have allowed themselves to be distracted from God's will and work. Sadly, all it took was a promotion at work, a girlfriend, or a deer rifle.

Nehemiah suspected them of foul play, but he did not openly accuse them. Telling them he could not meet them, he allowed them to prove their true motives. If they really wanted peace, it would be made evident by their next move.

Ne 6:4 Yet they sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner.

Sanballat tried to pressure Nehemiah into doing what he wanted. He sent the same request four times. He refused to give up or even lighten up.

While Nehemiah was busy with the rebuilding of the wall, these messengers from Sanballat kept coming. He, being the supervisor of the project, had several responsibilities. He made sure the many groups constructing the wall stayed organized and functioning, made sure the necessary materials were on hand, checked the status of any injuries, helped to resolve any disagreements, oversaw those who were standing guard against any enemy who might attack, and constantly inspected the work that was being done.

And, as he moved from one task to another, these messengers from the enemy kept coming. Time after time, they kept coming.

The life of a child of God can be the same. The pressures of life often come in rapid fire succession. The devil is trying to distract us from our walk and work of the Lord. We need to stay focused on God's will and keep walking with Him.

If Sanballat was anything, he was persistent. He did not give up easily. By the way, neither does the devil. He has lost many battles, but he never gives up, he keeps coming.

However, Nehemiah was just as persistent as Sanballat. Each time, he answered "after the same manner". He continually refused every invitation. God tells His children to "not be weary in well doing" (Gal. 6:9).

Ne 6:5 Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand;

The pressure from Sanballat continued. Sanballat sent four verbal messages and then a written letter.

The average believer has a life filled with stress. We constantly battle peer, financial, and social pressure. Jesus told the church of Smyrna, "I know thy works, and tribulation" (Rev. 2:9 emphasis added). The word "tribulation" means "pressure". Jesus said also, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (Jn. 16:33 emphasis added). Paul said the believer should be "patient in tribulation" (Rom. 12:12 emphasis added). Our Lord warned us to expect pressure while on this mud-ball called earth.

Sanballat sent an "open letter". Generally, letters were sealed to assure privacy. An open letter had no seal and was meant to be seen by the public.

Sanballat hoped the public letter would accomplish what his previous attacks had not.

The letter from Sanballat made untrue statements about Nehemiah. His true colors were beginning to show.

Ne 6:6 Wherein was written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words.

The letter accused Nehemiah of treason against the king of Persia, which included a plan to establish himself as king with Jerusalem as his capital. It claimed Nehemiah and the Jews were planning a rebellion against the Persian government. Of course, none of this was true.

Sanballat used vague accusations by stating what the "heathen", which were the neighboring Gentile nations, were supposedly saying. False rumors are always vague enough to lead to the wrong conclusion.

Sanballat, named "Gashmu", also called "Geshem" (6:1), as the carrier of this rumor. Nehemiah knew it had come from the ungodly heart of Sanballat (cf. v. 8b).

First, he hoped the letter would divert Nehemiah's attention from the wall to the workers. If the workers began to question Nehemiah's motives for rebuilding the wall, they would not be as willing to work, and it would put the entire project in jeopardy.

Second, Sanballat hoped the letter would cause the Jews to question Nehemiah's honesty. Had he been lying, did he want to become a king and rule over them? Trust in leadership is vital in the Lord's work.

Third, Sanballat hoped the king of Persia would hear about this letter, believe Nehemiah was trying to overthrow his government, and launch an attack against Nehemiah. Nehemiah and the Jews would have been no competition against the Persian army.

Whether true or not, all rumors spread like wildfire and can cause a lot of damage.

Ne 6:7 And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together.

The letter also accused Nehemiah of hiring prophets to go along with him. Supposedly, these prophets were endorsing Nehemiah and trying to convince the people to follow him in his rebellion.

Sanballat said this "shall be reported to the king".

Sanballat was hoping the letter would accomplish at least two things.

First, he hoped it would drive a wedge between Nehemiah and the king of Persia. If the king was convinced that Nehemiah was planning a rebellion, he would withdraw his support and attack Nehemiah and the Jews.

Second, he hoped it would cause friction between Nehemiah and those who were working on the wall. If the workers could be convinced that Nehemiah had selfish intentions all along, they would quickly withdraw their support and stop working.

Ne 6:8 Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart.

Nehemiah did not try to defend himself with a long explanation of how faithful he had been to the king and to the building project; he simply proclaimed that their accusations were false. Nehemiah knew his own heart and knew his motives were pure. A clear conscience is a treasure (Acts 24:16; 1 Jn. 3:21).

Nehemiah knew the king would remember his faithfulness while he served him in Persia. He also knew those working on the wall would know he had been true and honest.

Being faithful pays off now and later. No doubt, Nehemiah was glad for how he had served God in the past.

The fact is, we cannot control what others do or say. We just have to do right and leave the rest with the Lord.

The word "feignest" means "invented". Nehemiah knew the lies had originated from the evil heart of Sanballat.

Ne 6:9 For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.

The true intentions of Sanballat and his followers are seen in this verse. They wanted to frighten the workers and discourage them from finishing the wall. Fear will weaken the heart of the greatest of God's children.

Israel was afraid in the wilderness (Ex. 14:11), Moses was afraid of being inadequate (Ex. 3:11), Elijah was afraid of Jezebel (1 Kg. 19:23), the disciples were afraid of the storm (Mt. 8:25), and Peter was afraid of the waves (Mt. 14:30). We dare not miss the fact that God took care of everyone of these I have just mentioned. In other words, their fear was unnecessary. And, so is ours.

As Nehemiah had done so many times before, he turned to the Lord in prayer. The success on the wall and the continual opposition of the enemy had served only to confirm to him the value of prayer.

Ne 6:10 Afterward I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee.

Nehemiah visited a prophet named Shemaiah. We are not told why, but perhaps he wanted Shemaiah to pray for him and to give him some godly advice. Nehemiah was trusting a man whom he thought to be God's man.

Under normal conditions, seeking godly counsel would have been a good idea (Pro. 1:5; 11:14; 12:15; 19:20; 20:18; 22:17).

Being "shut up" means he had shut himself into seclusion. Again, under normal conditions, this would be a sign of devotion to prayer and meditation. But, as we will discover, his seclusion was false, and he was anything but godly.

Sadly, this visit ended up being another point of pressure for Nehemiah. This time, the pressure came from one who claimed to be a man of God.

Shemaiah requested that he and Nehemiah meet in the Temple to protect themselves from the attack of Sanballat and his allies.

The words "in the night will they come to slay thee" may mean he was suggesting they would attack that very night. He was doing everything he could to persuade Nehemiah.

Shemaiah probably meant the outer court of the Temple since the Holy Place and Most Holy Place could be entered only by the priests.

Generally speaking, the Temple seemed like a good suggestion since it was a strong building and would be guarded by the Levites. However, Nehemiah recognized the holy house of God was not a place to run and hide. Making light of the things of God never ends well. Uzza found that out the hard way (1 Chr. 13:9-10).

Ne 6:11 And I said, Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.

Nehemiah recognized that being a leader required him to trust God and refuse to "flee". Running and hiding would have discredited Nehemiah. That is exactly what Sanballat wanted. The devil wants the same for every believer.

His saying "Should such a man as I" and "being as I am" was not spoken in pride or arrogance. He realized he was a leader, and leaders do not show fear or run from a fight. Leaders stand; they don't run.

Ne 6:12 And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

Shemaiah had been a true prophet in the past, but, sadly, he had sold out and become a secret agent of Sanballat and Tobiah.

Ne 6:13 Therefore was he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me.

Sanballat and Tobiah had paid Shemaiah to trick Nehemiah. He was not the first, or the last, preacher who strayed for the sake of a dollar.

First, they were attempting to make Nehemiah "afraid".

Hiding in the Temple would cause those who trusted Nehemiah to question his courage and faith. To follow a man in such a difficult and dangerous project as rebuilding the wall, only to see him lose courage and run, would be devastating.

Second, they were attempting to make Nehemiah "sin".

Nehemiah realized it would be sinful to hide in the Temple. The Temple was God's house, not a bomb shelter. It was holy and not to be used in any unspiritual manner. In like fashion, the New Testament believer should respect the house of God. Those who enter God's house should never take it lightly.

Third, they were trying to cause an "evil report" and "reproach" to be raised about Nehemiah. Nehemiah's reputation would be ruined by one act of fear.

This means Nehemiah would rather have died if the enemy attacked than do something so disgraceful. Some things are worth dying for.

Doesn't this sound like our Lord? He, like Nehemiah, rejected the offer of an easy way out (Mat. 4:8-9), refused to defend himself (Mk. 15:3), and also had rather die than to let the enemy win (Jn. 12:27-28).

Ne 6:14 My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear.

Once again, Nehemiah turned to prayer. As he had done before (4:4), he asked the Lord to deal with his enemies. God will fight our battles a lot better than we can if we will let Him. We always make a mess when we try to fight them ourselves.

Nehemiah named the "prophetess Noadiah" and other "prophets" as those who opposed the Lord's work on the wall. This should remind us that not all who claim to be speaking for God are either qualified by God or speaking for God.

Ne 6:15 So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.

Miraculously, they finished the work in 52 days. The entire job was done in less than two months. Only God could do such a thing. It proves what can be done when the people of God trust Him and do what He says. Nothing is impossible to those who are willing to trust and obey.

In spite of the opposition of the enemy and the weariness of the workers, the wall was completed.

Humanly speaking, Nehemiah could have packed his bags and headed back to Persia. The wall was complete, but his job was not yet done. God sent him to do more than repair a wall, He sent him to repair some lives. God wanted to make the Jews a holy people and He wanted to use Nehemiah to do it.

However, as we shall see, the job was not yet finished, and the war was not over. The same is true for the child of God. Hopefully, we will enjoy many victories and accomplish many great works for God, but we are not finished until we leave this world. Paul did not say "I have finished my course" until he was about to die (2 Tim. 4:7).

Ne 6:16 And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.

The "enemies" of Nehemiah saw that the wall was complete. It would be wonderful if those who live around us would see a work of God done in our lives. Seeing what God can do for us might make them see their need for God.

However, as we would expect, not all were excited about the completion of the wall. It is sad that there are some who get upset even at good news. When the "enemies" heard about the completed wall, they got upset.

The word "perceived" means "to know". It is the same word used in describing what God knew about Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:5). There was no doubt in their minds how the work had been completed.

The words "much cast down " mean "to fall".

The words "in their own eyes" mean "from their viewpoint" or "as they saw it" all speak of how the enemy viewed the situation. In other words, they realized they had been fighting a hopeless cause and the wall was a work of God and something they could not defeat. They were realizing what Gamaliel would say later, "But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God" (Acts 5:39).

Even the enemies of God had to admit it had been "wrought by" the God of Israel. It was nothing less than a miracle.

As a side note, I am astounded by how some commentators explain the quick completion of the wall. They describe the large number of workers and the fact that the foundation, and much of the material from the old wall, was already on hand. Their description almost disregards the hand of God.

The fact is, the entire situation was a work of God. Even the fact that the foundation and some of the old materials were still present was an act of God. He kept Nebuchadnezzar's army from doing more damage when they besieged Jerusalem (Dan. 1:1), He touched the heart of the king of Persia to provide the materials, He strengthened the people who worked and warred, He made the materials fit together as they worked, and He stopped the many attempts of the enemies of Nehemiah. God did it!

It is sad when the "enemies" of God see His hand more than those who claim to know Him.

Ne 6:17 Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters unto Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came unto them.

The wall was complete but the battle was not ended. Some of "nobles of Judah" had been communicating by letters with the enemy Tobiah all along. These were probably those spoken of earlier who had swindled the poor (5:7).

They were Jews who should have been on Nehemiah's side. It is one thing to do battle with those who are easily recognized as our enemy, it is something else when our enemy pretends to be our friend.

Ne 6:18 For there were many in Judah sworn unto him, because he was the son in law of Shechaniah the son of Arah; and his son Johanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.

The word "sworn" means "master" and has the idea of committing oneself to another. The same word is used to describe ownership (Ex. 21:28), marriage (Ex. 21:3). All of these emphasize a complete commitment.

At least one reason these nobles had joined with the enemy Tobiah was because he had married into their family.

Tobiah was related to the Jews in two different ways. First, he was the "son in law of Shechaniah". Second, his son had married the "daughter of Meshullam". Both of these had been workers on the wall (Neh. 3:4).

It is difficult to comprehend how anyone could be working on the wall and communicating with the enemy at the same time. The believer who refuses to commit themselves totally to God is doing the same thing these Jews did.

All these problems came about because some of the Jews had allowed their children to marry people of ungodly nations. God commanded the people of Israel to not marry people of other nations (Ex. 34:15-16; Dt. 7:1-4; Josh. 23:11-13; Jud. 3:6-7; 1 Kg. 11:2; 2 Cor. 6:14). He wanted His people to be holy and He knew they would have to say separate from the ungodly nations of the world to do so.

Too many times, a young believer will allow their heart to be smitten by an unbeliever. They intended to be a godly witness and win the unbeliever to Christ. However, all too often, the opposite happens and the believer is the one who is drawn away from the Lord.

Ne 6:19 Also they reported his good deeds before me, and uttered my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to put me in fear.

They tried to convince Nehemiah that Tobiah was really a good person who deserved to be treated fairly.

They "uttered my words to him" mean, they had served as spies and told Tobiah every thing Nehemiah said and did.

It seems they had been doing this during the construction of the wall and were continuing to after its completion.

Nehemiah said Tobiah "sent letters to put me in fear". He continued to try to intimidate and strike fear in the heart of Nehemiah.

In other words, like the Devil, he had not changed and he had not given up.

CHAPTER SEVEN

13. THE PEOPLE 7:1-73

In chapter seven, Nehemiah was organizing the city of Jerusalem. The wall was complete, but the city itself needed much work if it was to become the flourishing city God desired. Since there were relatively few people living in the city, it would be easy prey to an enemy. The new wall would not last long if there were no people in the city who would protect it. Nehemiah would eventually ask people to move into the city.

Ne 7:1 Now it came to pass, when the wall was built, and I had set up the doors, and the porters and the singers and the Levites were appointed,

The wall and gates were finished, but it was not time to relax or take a break. The wise believer realizes the danger of victory. We tend to drop our guard, which opens the door to our enemies' attack.

Instead of relaxing, Nehemiah turned to the spiritual aspect of the reconstruction of Jerusalem. During the 70 years of the Jews' captivity in Babylon and the many years since, the Temple had been neglected.

The neglected Temple was an indication of the uncommitted lives of the Jews. In like fashion, an inconsistent attendance at the local church indicates an inconsistent believer. Simply put, if a person is not faithful to the church, they are not faithful to the Lord.

Nehemiah began choosing porters, singers, and Levites at this point in time to prepare the people for worship. The wall and city were being rebuilt so that God's people might have a place to worship and serve Him.

The victory of the completed wall opened the door to great potential for Jerusalem. It provided an opportunity for tremendous commerce and wonderful social events. However, the highlight of the city was to be the renewed presence and power of God. God wanted Jerusalem to become the spiritual capital of the world.

God wanted Jerusalem to be a spiritual powerhouse, not an economic conglomeration. Certainly, God is not opposed to His people being healthy, wealthy, or popular, but His primary desire is for them to be spiritual.

The blessings God sends our way are meant to make us more spiritual. Unfortunately, so many of God's people selfishly devour His blessings without thanking Him or using His blessings for Him.

He selected "porters". These were gatekeepers. It was their responsibility to open and close the gates. That means, they had to stay awake and alert at all times and refuse entry to any approaching enemy. They were to watch and sound an alarm if they saw anyone suspicious approaching.

The "singers" were those who would sing later as they worshipped the Lord. The Bible has much to say about singing and praise (Ps. 11:1-2; 13:6; 95:1-2; 147:1; Acts 16:25; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

The "Levites" would, once again, assume their service to the Lord in the Temple.

Nehemiah longed to see the worship and obedience of God's people restored. He had been burdened about the condition of the broken-down wall, but he was more concerned about the spiritually broken-down lives of the Jews.

Ne 7:2 That I gave my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the ruler of the palace, charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man, and feared God above many.

Nehemiah started by choosing leaders. He assigned the operation of the city of Jerusalem to "Hanani, and Hananiah". He, contrary to the accusations of Sanballat, did not rebuild the wall for self-promotion. He turned the control over to others.

Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, was the one who had told him of the sad condition of the wall to begin with (cf. 1:2). He was a "faithful man" who had proven himself by staying true to the will of God. There is no overestimating the importance of being faithful in God's work. Paul tells us faithfulness is "required" of God's stewards (1 Co 4:2). A steward worked for the owner of some property. He owned nothing himself, but he was "faithful" to do as the owner desired. You may not be able to do what someone else can, but you can be faithful to do what you can.

Nehemiah put Hananiah in charge of the "palace". This palace was a fortified citadel that guarded the northern side of the Temple. In other words, Hananiah was in charge of the security system of the city. The selection of such a man was exceedingly important. For this reason, Nehemiah chose a man who was "faithful" and "feared God" more than most.

This gives us great insight into how Nehemiah chose the men. No doubt, the Holy Spirit led him in choosing, but these were spiritual men who loved God and wanted His will.

This reminds me of the early church selecting deacons by choosing seven men "of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom" (Acts 6:3). Unfortunately, the average modern church looks for personality instead of purity.

Ne 7:3 And I said unto them, Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot; and while they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar them: and appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, every one in his watch, and every one to be over against his house.

Generally, the gates of a city would be opened at sunrise and closed at sunset. However, Nehemiah had the gates kept closed until midday. This made sure everyone was awake and alert, and an enemy could be clearly recognized if they attacked.

The watchmen were to "stand by" to make sure the gates were closed and barred at night.

The "inhabitants" of Jerusalem were divided and assigned watch to different sections of the wall. Also, "every one" was to keep watch at the part of the wall that was close to their house.

Clearly, all the inhabitants (citizens) of the city were expected to keep an open eye and watch for any sign of an approaching enemy. All believers must keep watch. How many times has a spiritual victory been lost because someone did not watch for the enemy? Peter fell because he did not heed the warning of Jesus (Lk. 22:31).

Ne 7:4 Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded.

Nehemiah noticed the city was "large", which means "roomy", and the "people were few". A good bit of the city was unoccupied, and there was plenty of space to spare.

The Hebrew word translated "people" refers to a group that is bound together. It is the same word used where God said, "Behold, the people is one, and they have one language" (Gen. 11:6). It speaks here of how the people who were in Jerusalem were united in purpose. They were small in number but united in heart.

Unfortunately, the same word can be used to describe God's people when they had angered God (Ex. 32:11). God saw the entire nation as one because they were all guilty of the same sin.

The "houses were not builded" means there were many abandoned houses that needed repair. In other words, the wall was complete, but now the city needed attention. The city had remained, for the most part, in the same same condition it was in when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city of Jerusalem approximately 150 years earlier. Imagine the condition of the city you live in if suddenly almost everyone moved out and left it abandoned for 150 years.

Every believer, like Nehemiah, should recognize that the same is true of God's work in this world. God's work is vast, and there are relatively few who are busy doing their part. Jesus said the harvest is great, but the "labourers are few" (Mt 9:37). He went on to say, "Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9:38).

The vast majority of today's churches are like the city of Jerusalem. There is a building with few present and even fewer working to make it better. Those churches need a Nehemiah.

Ne 7:5 And my God put into mine heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy. And I found a register of the genealogy of them which came up at the first, and found written therein,

Once again, we see evidence of Nehemiah's close, and sensitive, communication with the Lord. He said, "God put into my heart" what his next step should be. He was always quick to acknowledge the fact that God, and not himself, was the one directing the rebuilding project (2:8, 18; 6:16; 7:5). Any good thing in the heart of man must come from the Lord (Rom. 7:18).

God showed him, just as he had taken a survey of the city, he needed to take a survey of the people. The city and the wall would mean nothing without people. An enemy would have no problem destroying both if there were no people to defend them. What good is a beautiful church building if it is full of empty spots on the pews?

Nehemiah understood the importance of replenishing the city with those who were of pure Jewish descent. The "genealogy" told him which Jewish family each person came from. To get an accurate record of the people, Nehemiah used a "register" Ezra had written earlier (Ezra 2:1-70).

This register gave the names of those "who came up at the first", which refers to the Jews who, approximately 100 years earlier, came with Zerubbabel in the first group who returned to Judah from Babylon.

Determining those who first returned to Judah after the Babylonian captivity made perfect sense. Their returning to their homeland at their first opportunity showed they cared about Jerusalem and wanted God's will in their lives. They were the type of people who would be needed to occupy Jerusalem. They were being rewarded now for their faithfulness years earlier. God told us we would reap in "due season" if we "faint not" (Gal. 6:9).

It is very important to remember that Nehemiah was making this list because he would later ask them to resettle in and around the city of Jerusalem (11:2).

Ne 7:6 These are the children of the province, that went up out of the captivity, of those that had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and came again to Jerusalem and to Judah, every one unto his city;

In verses 6-73, Nehemiah gave the list of those who had first left Babylon to return to their hometowns in and around Jerusalem. This property was that which God had given them. It was the Promised Land.

Ezra recorded this list also (Ezra 2:1-61).

There are some minor differences between Ezra's (Ezra 2:1-61) and Nehemiah's (Neh. 7:6-69) lists.

The small differences can be easily explained.

One, Ezra's list was made while they were still in Babylon and before they left for Judah. Nehemiah's list was made in Judah some 100 years later.

Two, some could have changed their minds at the last minute. Some planned to go to Jerusalem, but did not, and some planned not to go, but did.

Three, there had been births and deaths between the two lists.

Four, Nehemiah may have included those who settled in nearby regions around Jerusalem and not just those inside the city.

Some may think this long list of names is a waste of time and space. It may be somewhat difficult to read, but we dare not take them lightly.

I am glad that every name was important to God. My name is in the Lamb's Book of Life, and I certainly do not want God to forget about me. You may not be too important to the world, but if you belong to God, you are important to Him.

Ne 7:7 Who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The number, I say, of the men of the people of Israel was this;

Nehemiah's list included 18 families and clans (7:8-25).

Ne 7:8-25 The children of Parosh, two thousand an hundred seventy and two. The children of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy and two. The children of Arah, six hundred fifty and two. The children of Pahath-moab, of the children of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand and eight hundred and eighteen. The children of

Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four. The children of Zattu, eight hundred forty and five. The children of Zaccai, seven hundred and threescore. The children of Binnui, six hundred forty and eight. The children of Bebai, six hundred twenty and eight. The children of Azgad, two thousand three hundred twenty and two. The children of Adonikam, six hundred threescore and seven. The children of Bigvai, two thousand threescore and seven. The children of Adin, six hundred fifty and five. The children of Ater of Hezekiah, ninety and eight. The children of Hashum, three hundred twenty and eight. The children of Bezai, three hundred twenty and four. The children of Hariph, an hundred and twelve. The children of Gibeon, ninety and five.

Nehemiah's list included 4,289 priests (7:39-42).

Ne 7:39–42 The priests: the children of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy and three. The children of Immer, a thousand fifty and two. The children of Pashur, a thousand two hundred forty and seven. The children of Harim, a thousand and seventeen.

Nehemiah's list included 360 Levites which includes singers and gatekeepers (7:43-45).

Ne 7:43–45 The Levites: the children of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, and of the children of Hodevah, seventy and four. The singers: the children of Asaph, an hundred forty and eight. The porters: the children of Shallum, the children of Ater, the children of Talmon, the children of Akkub, the children of Hatita, the children of Shobai, an hundred thirty and eight.

Nehemiah's list included the Temple servants (7:46-56).

Ne 7:46–56 The Nethinims: the children of Ziha, the children of Hashupha, the children of Tabbaoth, The children of Keros, the children of Sia, the children of Padon, The children of Lebana, the children of Hagaba, the children of Shalmal, The children of Hanan, the children of Giddel, the children of Gahar, The children of Reaiah, the children of Rezin, the children of Nekoda, The children of Gazzam, the children of Uzza, the children of Phaseah, The children of Besai, the children of Meunim, the children of Nephishesim, The children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur, The children of Bazlith, the children of Mehida, the children of Harsha, The children of Barkos, the children of Sisera, the children of Tamah, The children of Nezhiah, the children of Hatipha.

Nehemiah's list included the descendants of Solomon's servants (7:57-60).

Ne 7:57–60 The children of Solomon's servants: the children of Sotai, the children of Sophereth, the children of Perida, The children of Jaala, the children of Darkon, the children of Giddel, The children of Shephatiah, the children of Hattil, the children of Pochereth of Zebaim, the children of Amon. All the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon's servants, were three hundred ninety and two.

Nehemiah's list included 642 of those who could not trace their ancestries (7:61-62).

Ne 7:61–62 And these were they which went up also from Tel-melah, Tel-haresha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer: but they could not shew their father's house, nor their seed, whether they were of Israel. The children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred forty and two.

Nehemiah's list included some priests who could not trace their genealogies (7:63-64).

Ne 7:63–64 And of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai, which took one of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite to wife, and was called after their name. These sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but it was not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood.

Nehemiah was forced to reject these for the priesthood because they were unable to prove their ancestry. God required those serving as priests to prove themselves to be descendants of Aaron (Ex. 28:1).

No doubt Nehemiah regretted having to refuse these men. But, he understood the importance of having men whom God approved. The act of worship is not to be taken lightly. God does not use those He does not qualify.

The church of today needs to understand that fact. We are living in a day when man's opinion matters more than what the Bible says.

Nehemiah did not select his friends or those he desired, he selected those God had chosen. This was not a personality contest. Today, personality and charisma matter more than the approval of God.

Ne 7:65 And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and Thummim.

We cannot be certain about what the Urim (lights) and Thummim (perfections) were. We do know it was something used to discern the Lord's will about difficult matters. The priests kept in the Urim and Thummim their breastplates (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8). Some believe they were like dice or different colored stones. Others think they were stones with symbols indicating yes and no.

The Bible does not have a lot to say about the Urim and Thummim (Num. 27:21; Dt. 33:8; Josh. 7:14-18; 1 Sam. 14:37-45; 2 Sam. 21:1).

Ne 7:66-69 The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore, Beside their manservants and their maidservants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and they had two hundred forty and five singing men and singing women. Their horses, seven hundred thirty and six: their mules, two hundred forty and five: Their camels, four hundred thirty and five: six thousand seven hundred and twenty asses.

Nehemiah mentioned some who gave financially (7:70-72).

Ne 7:70-72 And some of the chief of the fathers gave unto the work. The Tirshatha gave to the treasure a thousand drams of gold, fifty basons, five hundred and thirty priests' garments. And some of the chief of the fathers gave to the treasure of the work twenty thousand drams of gold, and two thousand and two hundred pound of silver. And that which the rest of the people gave was twenty thousand drams of gold, and two thousand pound of silver, and threescore and seven priests' garments.

The work of God, like any organization or business, requires finances to operate. It isn't always the amount that we give that matters to God. No doubt the poverty stricken believers in the churches of Macedonia gave a relatively small amount (1 Cor. 8:1-2). Also, the little widow lady gave only two mites (Mk. 12:42).

Yet, the Lord recorded both the Macedonian believers and the widow in His Word. He commended the Macedonians because they they first gave of themselves (1 Cor. 8:5), and Jesus said the widow had given more than those giving large amounts because she gave all she had (Mk. 12:43-44). It isn't what we give but what we keep that determines the amount we gave.

God doesn't really need our money. He can keep His work operating in miraculous ways if He so desires. The wilderness journey of Israel proves that fact (Dt. 8:1-4). He wants our money because He wants us.

Nehemiah's list included the servants, the singers, the givers, and even their animals (7:66-69). Everyone, and everything, is important to God.

Ne 7:73 So the priests, and the Levites, and the porters, and the singers, and some of the people, and the Nethinims, and all Israel, dwelt in their cities; and when the seventh month came, the children of Israel were in their cities.

These were those who returned to their homeland of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas under Nehemiah's instruction. It would seem that Nehemiah used the public register (7:5) to determine the correct location of their family property.

They were all important for they did what most of the Jews (approximately 92%) had refused to do, that is, return to the Promised Land after their captivity in Babylon. They did what few of God's children are willing to do today: they heard the voice of God and obeyed.

So, not only was the wall completed, but the people were where they needed to be. As we will discover in the next chapter, they were where they needed to be geographically, but they still needed to make a move spiritually. Their bodies were in the right place; the Lord was about to get their hearts in the right place.

It is so easy to be faithful at church but not be where we need to be spiritually. Being where the Lord wants us is one thing, being what the Lord wants us is totally different.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In this chapter, Ezra becomes a part of what God was doing in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Thirteen years earlier, Ezra had led a group of Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 7-10). He had preached the Word of God, and those Jews repented (Ezra 9).

In chapter eight, the Jews who followed Nehemiah from Babylon to Jerusalem call on Ezra to come and read the Word of God (8:1-3). A spiritual awakening is the result.

14. THE PREACHING 8:1-18

THE PEOPLE WERE RECEIVING

Ne 8:1 And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel.

All those who had followed Nehemiah from Babylon gathered at the water gate. It is no surprise that they chose to gather at the Water Gate. As mentioned earlier, the water gate was a picture of the Word of God. What better place could have been chosen?

This gathering would last eight days.

Verses 1-12 are a record of the events that took place on the first day. Verses 13-17 record the events of the second day. Verse 18 tells us they held a solemn assembly on the eighth day.

Notice, the people were the ones who asked that the law of God be read. God had instructed Israel to publicly read the Scripture every seven years at the Feast of the Tabernacles (Dt. 31:10-13). However, this request for the Scripture came from hearts who longed for God, not of an obligation.

Once again, we see the Spirit of God at work. He had worked in Nehemiah about the broken wall (1:4), in King Artaxerxes to let Nehemiah go and provide the needed materials (2:8-9), in the Jews to return to Jerusalem and surrounding area (2:18), and in giving them victory over Sanballat and those who opposed the rebuilding of the wall. Now, He was doing a spiritual work in the hearts of the people who had followed Nehemiah and left Babylon to move in, and around, Jerusalem.

Ezra read and explained the law of God, and the people received it as it was, a message from God. The word "receive" means "to welcome". James tells us to "receive with meekness" God's Word (Jam. 1:21). Paul thanked the Lord that the people from Thessalonica had received the Word he preached (1 Th. 2:13).

Undoubtedly, the finishing of the wall helped to bring about a renewed desire for spiritual matters among the people. One victory can lead to another victory when God's people continue to trust and obey. When the frightened believer witnesses to one person, it gives them the courage to witness to another. When God blesses the singer to sing one song, it encourages them to sing again. When the young preacher preaches his first message, it encourages him to preach again.

Unfortunately, the same is true with defeat. One failure can lead to another if we allow it.

This renewal is seen in how they "gathered" together as "one man". Unity is vitally important for any move of God. On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God did not move until they were gathered "with one accord in one place" (Acts 2:1-2). A worship service without unity will lack the moving of the Spirit of God.

The renewal is also seen in how they requested Ezra to "bring the book of the law of Moses". A spiritual renewal always starts and continues by God's people turning back to the Word of God.

Ezra had led the second group back to Jerusalem and was responsible for getting the Temple rebuilt. It was natural for him to be the one who read from the law on this occasion.

The "book of the law of Moses" refers to the first five books of the Old Testament. That means, Ezra read of how God had created all things, how sin was introduced into the world, what God expected of mankind, and how God judges those who sin.

Ezra read that "which the LORD had commanded to Israel". God does not request or suggest; He commands. He is the only one who has the right to command. If a man decides to go his own way, he is disobeying God's command and will suffer the consequences.

Ne 8:2 And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.

God's Word is not a magic formula that automatically changes anyone who reads

it. It is a living and powerful book, but it must be understood if it is to change lives. For this reason, God sent prophets in the Old Testament (1 Chr. 36:15; Jer. 25:4; 35:15; 44:4) and preachers and teachers (Rom. 10:15; 1 Cor. 1:21; Eph. 4:11-12; 2 Tim. 4:2) in the New Testament to explain His Word.

The "first day of the seventh month" was the New Year's Day of the civil year for the Jews. The Jewish year began on the first day of Tishrei (around September and October of our calendar).

It was on this day that the feast of trumpets was to be observed (Lev. 23:23-25; Num. 29:1). The sound of the blowing of the trumpets was intended to cause the Jews to search their hearts and repent of any sin.

Ne 8:3 And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.

Ezra read the Word from "morning until midday". From sunrise to noon would be approximately six hours.

They were "attentive" to the reading of the Word. Their attentiveness was another indication of the Spirit of God working. A hunger for God's Word comes from a work of the Spirit in the heart of man. The natural nature of man has no desire for the truth of Scripture.

They were not looking at each other, complaining about how late it was getting, and talking about what they were going to eat for lunch. They were hungry for spiritual food, not for physical.

Ne 8:4 And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam.

The "pulpit" was a raised wooden platform, large enough for the fourteen people listed. It allowed all the people to see and hear better. Jesus used a boat for a pulpit (Lk. 5:3).

The 13 men listed were on the pulpit with Nehemiah and agreed with his ministry and his message. Their presence provided support to Ezra and assurance to the listening crowd.

As is so often the case with Jewish names, the meaning of their names is interesting. Mattithiah (gift of the LORD), Shema (heard), Anaiah (the LORD has answered), and Urijah (flame of the LORD), and Hilkiah (portion of the LORD), and Maaseiah (work of the LORD), on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah (the LORD has ransomed), and Mishael (who is as God is), and Malchiah (appointed by the LORD), and Hashum (enriched), and Hashbadana (considerate judge), Zechariah (the LORD has remembered), and Meshullam (to make amends of reward).

THE PEOPLE WERE RESPECTING

Ne 8:5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

Ezra's position placed him "above all the people" so everyone could see him clearly.

The people respected the Word of God enough to where they "stood up" when it was being read. We should not worship the Bible, but we ought to have a great respect for it. It is not just another book among many. It is the inspired, inerrant, infallible word of Almighty God.

THE PEOPLE WERE RESPONDING

Ne 8:6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The people did not just respect God's Word; they responded to it. They allowed it to touch their hearts and bring them to worship.

The word "blessed" refers to an act of adoration. Ezra openly, unashamedly, worshipped and praised the Lord.

The name "LORD" is the Hebrew word that refers to the eternal, self-existent nature of God. He is the One who needs nothing, or no one, to exist and function. No human can make that claim, for all mankind needs something or someone to survive.

The word "God" is the Hebrew word "Elohim". It refers to the strength and power of God. It is the word used to describe God's creative power (Gen. 1:1), His power to make man (Gen. 1:26), in setting Israel free from Egypt (Ex. 20:2), in opening the Red Sea for Israel (Ex. 14:19), and in delivering Daniel from the lion's den (Dan. 6:22).

Ezra recognized these things, and more, about God and it caused him to worship with all of his heart.

The word "Amen" means "so be it". It means they agreed with what they were hearing. Amens used to be common in the house of God. Silence in the house of God is usually a sign of our spiritual decline and a shame to the body of Christ.

They lifted "up their hands" to express praise to the Lord.

The lifting of hands is mentioned often in the Bible.

- The Bible connects the lifting of hands with praise

Ps 63:4 Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name.

Ps 134:2 Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, And bless the LORD.

Paul wrote, "I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (1 Ti 2:8). Those words were not just the desire of Paul, they were God's message to all His people.

- The Bible connects the lifting of hands with prayer

Ps 141:2 Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; And the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.

The lifting of hands is a sign of us reaching out and expecting to receive from the Lord.

Ps 88:9 Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: LORD, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee.

Ps 143:6 I stretch forth my hands unto thee: My soul thirsteth after thee, as a thirsty land. Selah.

- The Bible connects the lifting of hands with power

Moses lifted his hands when the people of God were fighting Amalek (Ex. 17:8-14). While his hands were up, Israel prevailed; when his hands dropped, the enemy prevailed.

- The Bible connects the lifting of hands with presence

Solomon lifted his hands toward heaven and the fire of God fell and the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house (2 Chr. 6:12-13; 7:1).

- The Bible connects the lifting of hands with pain

Ezra was brokenhearted when he heard about the sin of the people of Israel. He fell on his knees and spread out his hands to the Lord (Ezra 9:5).

Like a child reaching up to their daddy, the hurting child of God can reach up to their heavenly Father.

They "bowed their heads" means they went down on all fours and touched the ground with their foreheads.

Their actions spoken of here are normal expressions of worship. They should be common in the house of God today. The people of God have always been known for their worship of their God. Abraham worshipped by being willing to give his son to God (Gen. 22:12-14), Mary worshipped with the alabaster box of ointment (Lk. 7:37-38; Jn. 11:2), and Paul and Silas worshipped while in prison (Acts 16:24-26).

True worship is a response to an overflowing sense of awe for God. We are told to make a "joyful noise unto the LORD" (Ps 100:1), and to "Come before his presence with singing" (Ps 100:2), to clap our hands and shout unto God with the voice of triumph (Ps. 47:1).

Worship refreshes our thoughts about God's work in our lives. Worship helps us to be more thankful for what God has done.

This is a command to all of God's people. Failure to worship is as much a sin as failure to keep any other of God's commands. Failure to worship often leads to our spiritual decline and other sins. Failure to worship causes us to be ungrateful.

The person who does not worship will probably not serve effectively.

So often, we fail to worship because we feel no emotion. Worship deals with the facts of who God is and what God does, not with how we feel. The fact is, worship will help produce the emotions we lack. Worship can bring us out of the pit of despair. David's worship brought him out of a "horrible pit" (Ps. 40:1-5). Worship opens our eyes to God's love, power, and grace (Ps. 40:5).

Many of God's people never worship publicly because they do not feel comfortable doing so. The question is, are we going to do what we are comfortable doing, or will we obey the Word of God?

Ne 8:7 Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place.

The thirteen men listed here assisted the Levites in explaining the meaning of the Scripture Ezra had read.

We aren't given the details about how Ezra and the priests explained God's law

to this crowd. Perhaps Ezra read certain portions of Scripture and paused reading so he and the priests could go throughout the crowd explaining it to smaller groups.

The people "stood in their place" that they might hear the Word being read and explained. They wanted to know what it said and what they should do about it. We are to be doers, not just listeners (Jam. 1:22).

Ne 8:8 So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

The word "distinctly" means "to specify", which means they expounded the meaning of each word in a way that would apply to their daily lives.

Giving the "sense" means they explained what the Scripture meant so the people could understand.

Some believe the words "caused them to understand the reading" means they translated the words from Hebrew to Aramaic, since these Jews, having been in Babylonian captivity, did not understand the Hebrew scripture. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, who were post-captivity prophets, spoke and wrote Hebrew.

Ezra's goal was that the people might "understand" what God had said.

Years earlier, he had set his heart to study the law that he might live it and teach it to others (Ezra 7:10). Those who teach and preach must devote themselves to studying and living the Word. Paul told Timothy to "study" that he might "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

This verse makes it clear that Ezra not only read the law, he took time to explain the meaning of what he read. The preacher or teacher should set this as the goal of their ministry. Eloquent words are useless if no one understands what they mean. Paul used words simple enough so everyone could understand (1 Cor. 2:1). Dr. Harry Ironside used to say, "Put the cookies on the bottom shelf".

THE PEOPLE WERE REPENTING

Those who heard the Word recognized their need for spiritual renewal.

Ne 8:9 And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.

Nehemiah was the "Tirshatha" (his Persian title as governor), and Ezra was the "priest". Some of the "Levites" helped Ezra in the reading and explaining of the law of God.

The people "wept" because when they heard Ezra read what God had commanded to Israel, they realized how they had failed. Paul wrote, "for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

Fortunately, they repented when they were confronted with their spiritual failure. This conviction brought sorrow (8:10) and grief (8:11). Like David, when he finally admitted his sin, they did not try to excuse themselves or explain it away.

We would do well to do the same. When God shows us a flaw or failure in our

lives, we need to admit it, repent, and accept His forgiveness. Resisting is rebellion (1 Sam. 15:23), and that never turns out well. If you doubt that, just ask Pharaoh (Ex. 14:28-30), or Jonah (Jon. 4:1-3), or the unrepentant thief on the cross (Lk. 23:39).

Ezra was able to tell them to "mourn not, nor weep" because they were responding to God's conviction with repentance, which would bring deliverance from their sin. The dawn of revival was coming, it was time to rejoice.

The sorrow of conviction brings the joy of forgiveness (2 Cor. 7:10). Paul told the Corinthians he did not regret sending the letter that brought them grief because it had caused them to repent of their sin (2 Cor. 7:8-10). He was not sorry he had made them sorry because it caused them to get right with God.

Conviction brings cleansing, and cleansing brings celebration.

Holiness and joy go together. Jesus said, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt. 5:4).

The "holy" day Nehemiah spoke of was the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:37-43). More will be said about this in the following verses.

THE PEOPLE WERE REASSURED

Ne 8:10 Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength.

Nehemiah, Ezra, and the priests reassured the people that, since they had repented, their sins had been forgiven, and it was time to rejoice. Having been forgiven, it was right for them to "eat the fat, and drink the sweet", and enjoy the "joy of the LORD". They were to eat the best and drink the best they had and rejoice over God's goodness.

The "joy of the LORD" is our strength. Like a good parent who wants their child to be happy, our heavenly Father wants His children to be joyful.

Included with their joy they needed to remember those who had less than themselves and "send portions" of their food to them. Those who were poor should have a reason to rejoice also.

THE PEOPLE WERE REJOICING

Ne 8:11 So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved.

The word "stilled" means "to hush or to be silent". The Psalmist used this word when he talked about God calming the stormy sea (Ps 107:29).

They were not to be "grieved" because God had forgiven their sin. There is nothing greater than realizing God has forgiven us. What joy it is to know there is nothing between your soul and your Savior.

That means, just as important as it is for us to confess when we sin, is the importance to accept our forgiveness when we confess and repent.

One of the greatest, and perhaps the greatest, truths of Scripture is the fact that God forgives those who confess and repent. John tells us if we "confess" our sins, God is "faithful" and "just" to "forgive" our sins and "cleanse" us from "all" unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9).

To "confess" means "to agree with". It means we are agreeing with God that we have done wrong. God is "faithful" means He is dependable and He will forgive us every time we confess. The word "just" means "holy, or right". How can God forgive sin? Sin has to be paid for, even God, and especially God, cannot ignore it or sweep it under the rug as though it never happened. God is able and right to forgive those who confess because Jesus' death on the cross paid for all sin. The blood of Jesus washes away the sin and the punishment that it includes (1 Jn. 1:7).

To not be "grieved" over their sin does not mean they were to take lightly the fact that they had sinned. It does mean that once they confessed, they were to accept God's forgiveness and reject any further guilt. Satan, and we ourselves, can make us feel guilty, even after we have confessed and repented. False guilt can cause depression and despair.

Once we confess, God's forgiveness is instant and complete. If you are battling over past sin that you have already confessed, believe that, accept that, rejoice in that, and let God's full work of forgiveness be yours. The blood of Jesus has cleansed you.

Ne 8:12 And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.

They were able to rejoice because "they had understood the words that were declared unto them". The same Word of God that had shown them their sin had shown them their forgiveness.

The word "mirth" means "glee". They wholeheartedly celebrated the goodness of God.

Part of their celebration included giving part of what they had to those who had little. The God who gives to us wants us to give to others (Pro. 11:25; Mt. 10:8; Lk. 11:13; Acts 20:35; Heb. 13:16).

Ne 8:13 And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law.

On the second day, the heads of all the families gathered with the priests, the Levites, and Ezra. Once again, they gathered to hear Ezra read and explain the law of the Lord.

THE PEOPLE WERE REMEMBERING

Ne 8:14 And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:

Ezra continued to read the Word until he reached where God had instructed Moses to observe the Feast of Tabernacles. The Word of God caused the Jews to remember the Feast of the Tabernacles (Lev. 23:40-44).

The Feast of Tabernacles was one of the three annual feasts where God required the Jewish males to come to Jerusalem (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:33–44; Num. 29:12–38; Dt. 16:13–17). Each feast was a time of remembrance of something God had done for His people.

The Feast of Tabernacles was a week-long time of offering sacrifices, joyful praise, and thanksgiving, which focused on God's goodness to Israel while they were in the wilderness.

The "booths" were small huts made of a variety of trees. God told the people of Israel to stay in these booths for seven days (Lev. 23:43).

Ne 8:15 And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written.

The people gathered olive, pine, myrtle, palm, and thick branches to construct temporary places of dwelling. They stayed in these temporary huts for seven days and nights.

They heard these words on the second day of the seventh month (cf. 8:2, 13). Since the Feast of Tabernacles began on the fifteenth day of the month, they had two weeks to spread the word and to prepare.

Staying in these "booths" was to remind the people of at least four things.

One, it reminded them of how God had set Israel free from Egypt and Pharaoh (Ex. 12:52).

Two, it was to remind them of how the people of Israel lived in tents during the forty years in the wilderness.

Three, since this feast was observed during harvest time, it was to remind them of how God had miraculously taken care of them during those forty years.

Four, it was a foreshadowing of Jesus' second coming when He returns to earth and sets up his kingdom.

Ne 8:16 So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephraim.

While there is no definitive headcount, historians estimate there were hundreds of thousands of Jews who came to Jerusalem during this feast. Jerusalem was literally full of these huts.

Ne 8:17 And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness.

The name "Jeshua" refers to Joshua, the son of Nun. This verse is not saying the Jews had neglected the Feast of Tabernacles completely since the days of Joshua. They had celebrated it on more than one occasion (2 Chr. 8:13; Ezra 3:1-4).

The word "so" tells us they had not celebrated it with this type of zeal and enthusiasm since the days of Joshua. Apparently, they had celebrated the feast but had done it halfheartedly. What was intended to be a week of worship and celebration, they had turned it into something mundane and routine. The same can happen with our church services.

Their sorrow had turned to "great gladness". Obeying the commands of God always brings joy and peace (Ps. 119:2, 165; Jn. 15:10).

THE PEOPLE WERE REVIVED

Ne 8:18 Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner.

This verse tells us the Jews did more than what God required.

The law of God required the public reading of the Scripture once every seven years during the Feast of Tabernacles (Dt. 31:10-12). However, Ezra continued reading and explaining the "law of God" during the entire week. Their zeal had produced a hunger for God's Word.

As God had instructed (Num. 29:35), there was a "solemn assembly" on the eighth day. The Feast of Tabernacles began and ended with a Sabbath (Lev. 23:39). That means, on the eighth day, they observed a Sabbath and did no work. They spent the day worshipping, offering sacrifices, and resting from their labors (Lev. 23:36). God intended that this day be a time of worship when His people could draw closer to Him and enjoy His presence.

God had worked on the hearts of the people, and they had been revived. We, like those in Nehemiah's day, need a spiritual awakening. Fortunately, God is able to revive those who will come to Him in submission and obedience (2 Chr. 7:14).

If it happens, it will begin as it did with Nehemiah. Someone, somewhere, will see the sad condition of God's people, get concerned, and do something about it. It will take a turning back to the Word, to prayer, and to godly living.

Unfortunately, the spiritual awakening discussed in chapter 8 did not last. They allowed themselves to drift away again. By chapter 13, they were neglecting the Temple offerings, breaking the Sabbath, and intermarrying with foreign women.

The sinful nature of man seems to always take over the attitude and actions of God's people. We may wonder, is it worth the effort if man will eventually go back to his unspiritual conduct.

Revivals may not last, but it is better to have a revival than not have one. God will get the glory He would not have gotten, people will get help that would not have been helped, and souls will get saved that would have remained lost, had there been no revival. That alone makes it worth the effort.

CHAPTER NINE

15. **THE PRAISE** 9:1-38

Ne 9:1 Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them.

Two days after the feast of tabernacles concluded, the people observed an entire day of self-examination. They gathered together with hearing God's law being read (v.3), fasting, wearing sackcloth, and tossing dirt upon themselves.

The wall was complete, but the Holy Spirit was still working on the people. In fact, we might say the Holy Spirit was working because the wall had been completed. Quite often, God is waiting on His people to move before He moves.

The practice of fasting, which is abstaining from food for a certain period of time, was common throughout the Bible. Fasting was connected to seeking God and His will (Judges 20:26), drawing closer to Him (Lk. 2:37), mourning (1 Sam. 31:13), repenting of sin (1 Sam. 7:6), overcoming temptation (Mt. 4:1), and making requests from the Lord (Ezra 8:23).

They were wearing "sackclothes". Sackcloth was a coarse, very uncomfortable material, usually made of black goat hair. Wearing sackcloth inside the clothing was a sign of mourning, grief, humility, or repentance (Gen 37:34; 1 Kgs. 21:25; Est. 4:1-3; Jonah 3:5-7).

The tossing dirt or ashes on one's head and body was another sign of mourning, humility, or repentance (Job 2:12; Ezk. 27:30). Job said, "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Daniel said, "And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes" (Dan. 9:3). Jesus said the residents of Tyre and Sidon should have repented in sackcloth and ashes (Mt. 11:21).

Their actions point to the fact that they were broken over their sinful condition and desiring to make it right with God.

Ne 9:2 And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.

The word "seed" speaks of those who were true children of Israel and shows their uniqueness from all other nations.

Those who were true Israelis separated themselves from those who were not. This included them putting away their wives. This is a repeated theme in the book of Nehemiah (10:28; 13:25).

No doubt, this was a difficult decision but they were paying the consequences of disobeying God. God had commanded Israel to stay separate from other nations to prevent them from adopting their sins (Ex. 34:11-17). God especially forbade Israel to intermarry with anyone of a different religion (Lev. 20:24b; Dt. 7:3-4). Solomon's wives turned his heart away from God (1 Kgs. 11:4-6).

New Testament believers are also admonished to stay separate from the world (1 Cor. 15:33; 2 Cor. 6:14, 17).

God tells us to stay separate from the world, not to make us proud or for us to become isolationists. To the contrary, God wants His people to be different that they might reach the world with the truth. Israel failed to do this and the New Testament church hasn't done much better than they did.

They "confessed their sins". This confession took place after the victory of the rebuilt wall (6:15), after their earlier repentance (8:9), and after their joyful celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacles (8:17). They had drawn close to God, but now they were drawing even closer.

Recognition of sin after a special work of God is not unusual. When Isaiah saw the Lord, he also saw himself unclean (Isa. 6:1-5). Peter cried, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" after Jesus miraculously filled the ships with fish (Lk. 5:7-9). Even though Peter, as far as we can tell, was walking close to the Lord, he saw himself as unworthy to be in the presence of the holy Savior.

The wonder of walking with God is the fact that the closer we get, the more sensitive we become to our sin and the quicker we will repent. Repentance, like love and faith, grows in the life of a believer. We become more and more sensitive to our sin and to the voice of the Holy Spirit who strives to keep us spiritually clean. What a wonderful work of God.

They confessed not only their own sin but the "iniquities of their fathers". They admitted to the fact that they had done no better than their parents.

One of the most tragic of all circumstances is when the children see the horrible results of their parents' sin and then follow in their footsteps anyway. Many a drunkard came from a drunkard's home.

Acknowledging the sinful condition of their parents must have been especially difficult, for the Jews held their ancestors in very high esteem.

Ne 9:3 And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God.

For three hours (one fourth part of the day), they listened to the "law of the LORD" and for three hours, they "confessed". Their awakened spiritual attitude took them back to the Word.

We find here a wonderful cycle of spiritual life. When they heard the Word, it convicted them of their sin. Then, when they confessed their sin and got right with God, it produced an even greater desire to know and live the Word.

We are not told whether this confession involved individuals confessing their sin publicly or if they simply confessed privately to the Lord. I have a feeling some confessed only to the Lord, some to each other, and some publicly.

Private sin (between a believer and God) needs to be confessed only to the Lord. Personal sin (between one believer and another) needs to be confessed only to the offended believer. Public sin (that which affects a number of people) needs to be confessed publicly.

Ne 9:4 Then stood up upon the stairs, of the Levites, Jeshua, and Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani, and cried with a loud voice unto the LORD their God.

The "Levites" and certain Jewish leaders "cried with a loud voice unto the LORD their God". The spiritual leaders of the family of God should be willing to lead in all matters of faith, especially with confession and repentance.

Ne 9:5 Then the Levites, Jeshua, and Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, Stand up and bless the LORD your God for ever and ever: and blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

Others followed the example of those above. They encouraged all the people to "Stand up and bless the LORD". The word "bless" simply means "to praise and worship". All of God's children should worship and praise Him (Ps. 103:1, 2, 22; 104:1; 134:2).

The "name" of the Lord speaks of who He is and what He has done. When we talk about someone having a good name, we mean they have lived in a way that has given them a good reputation.

The following is the longest recorded prayer in the entire Bible. It is only 1,199 words long and it takes Alexander Scourby only seven minutes to read through it. Powerful prayer does not always have to be long prayer. In contrast to this being the longest prayer in the Bible, Peter's prayer to Jesus is the shortest. He cried, "Lord, save me" (Mt. 14:30) and was heard.

Prayer, to be the right kind of prayer, needs to be from the heart, but also generated by the Holy Spirit. This type of prayer may be long and extended, or short and direct.

The rest of the chapter gives the history of God's dealings with the Jews. It explains how God was good to the Jews even when they were bad. It also tells of how God dealt with the Jews when they were disobedient.

The following verses of this chapter tell us why they were praising the LORD.

They praised God because He created all things.

Ne 9:6 Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.

Their prayer gave glory to God for who He was and what He had done. He is God "alone". There is no one like Him.

They not only told the people to praise the LORD, but they also gave them some reasons why He should be praised. He should be praised because He "made heaven" and "all things that are therein".

Thou "preservest them all" means God keeps all His creation alive and flourishing. He didn't wind up the universe up like a wristwatch and let it run on its own. He, by His power, holds it all together and makes it function precisely (Col. 1:17).

Even the "host" (angels) of heaven worships God. Those beings created by God, who have never sinned, recognized the superiority of God. Angels rank higher in God's creation than humans (Ps. 8:4-5; Heb. 2:7), yet they worship God.

They praised God because He called and cared for His people.

Ne 9:7 Thou art the LORD the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham;

God selected "Abram" to raise a nation that would become as numerous as the stars in the heavens and grains of sand on the shores (Gen. 22:17).

God did not choose Abram because he was from the largest family; He chose him simply because He loved him (Dt. 7:6-8).

God led Abram from his homeland and eventually changed his name to "Abraham". Abram means "exalted father". Abraham means "father of a multitude". God changed his name while he was still without children. Abraham and Sarah waited a total of 25 years for this promised son (Gen. 12:1-4, 21:1-5).

Ne 9:8 And foundest his heart faithful before thee, and madest a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Jebusites, and the Girgashites, to give it, I say, to his seed, and hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous:

God made a "covenant" with Abraham, which simply means He made Abraham some promises. He has kept, or will keep, every promise He made.

God promised Abraham and his seed, what is commonly called the Promised Land. He promised it, and has "performed" what He promised, because He is "righteous". Unlike man, God always does the right thing.

The land God promised Abraham was occupied by the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites, and the Girgashites. God took the land from these people as a form of punishment for their sin against Him (Dt. 9:4). God not only withdraws His blessings, but sends His judgment on those who disobey Him.

Abraham's heart remained "faithful" (Rom. 4:17-20) until Isaac was born. There were times when he wondered about God's method of providing a son (cf. Gen. 16:1-4), but he never doubted that God would.

They praised God because He saw their affliction and heard their cry

Ne 9:9 And didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea;

God cared for Israel and heard their cry. God is a Father who hears the cry of His suffering children (Ex. 22:23; Ps. 20:1; 34:17-18; 91:15; 145:18; 1 Jn. 5:14). There are times when God answers our request, even before we ask (Isa. 65:24).

God delivered Israel from Pharaoh and Egyptian bondage (Ex. 3:7-8; 6:6; 12:51).

Ne 9:10 And shewedst signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land: for thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them. So didst thou get thee a name, as it is this day.

God delivered Israel by doing "signs and wonders" (10 plagues) unto "Pharaoh", "all his servants", and those inhabiting the land at that time.

Pharaoh and the Egyptians, "proudly" believed they were superior to Moses and the Jews. God was serious when he said, "Pride goeth before destruction, And an haughty spirit before a fall" (Pro. 16:18).

The power of God is displayed in the Old Testament by how He delivered Israel from the bondage of slavery and in the New Testament by how He raised Jesus from the dead. The Old Testament focuses on physical deliverance, while the New Testament focuses on spiritual deliverance.

Ne 9:11 And thou didst divide the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their persecutors thou threwest into the deeps, as a stone into the mighty waters.

God led Israel out of Egypt, knowing Pharaoh would pursue them. He miraculously parted the Red Sea, took Israel across on dry ground, and drowned Pharaoh and his army (Ex. 14:21-31).

They praised God because He led them in the wilderness

Ne 9:12 Moreover thou leddest them in the day by a cloudy pillar; and in the night by a pillar of fire, to give them light in the way wherein they should go.

God led His people with the Shekinah glory cloud (Ex. 13:21-22; 14:19-20, 24; 16:10; 19:9; 24:15-18; 34:5). This cloud was the visible presence of Almighty God. It descended upon the mercy seat in the Tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-38).

Even though the Bible uses the word "wandered" (Josh. 14:10) in describing the people of Israel in the wilderness, they were not out there just wandering in circles on their own. God led them every step of the way. He will still guide those who will follow Him. Jesus said the Spirit of God will guide us in all truth (Jn 16:13). Jesus said, "Follow me" (Mt. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 16:24; 19:21).

They praised God because He gave them laws to live by

Ne 9:13 Thou camest down also upon mount Sinai, and spakest with them from heaven, and gavest them right judgments, and true laws, good statutes and commandments:

Thou "camest down" acknowledges the fact that God is the God who dwells in heaven and rules over all the universe.

God came to "mount Sinai" that He might give the Law to Moses and the people of Israel (Ex. 20:1-17).

God's commands are "good". Even the laws of man are good, in that, they protect the innocent. The threat of punishment keeps the would-be thief from robbing the store owner.

God's commands are good because they show man he is a sinner. Paul said, "for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). He said also, "I had not known sin, but by the law" (Rom. 7:7). It's like driving down a road and seeing a speed limit sign. Until you saw the sign, you did not realize you were speeding.

God's commands are good because they warn man of the consequences of his sin. The holiness of God demands that He judge sin. He can not do otherwise for He cannot ignore sin. God has no desire that any person suffer the consequences of His judgment.

God's commands are "good" means they produce good in the lives of those who obey them. God is not simply trying to control mankind, He is trying to do that which will be good for them. Following God's commands makes life on earth as good as it can possibly be. True joy and contentment comes only from God. Since God made man, He is the One who knows what is best and what will make man happy.

God's commands are "good" because they show man he unable to keep them and, therefore, needs the forgiveness Jesus provides.

Ne 9:14 And madest known unto them thy holy sabbath, and commandedst them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses thy servant:

God gave His law by the "hand of Moses". God uses man to accomplish His will on earth (Phil. 2:13).

They praised God because He provided for them in the wilderness

Ne 9:15 And gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger, and broughtest forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and promisedst them that they should go in to possess the land which thou hadst sworn to give them.

God miraculously provided food (manna Ex. 16:14-16) and water from a rock (Ex. 17:6) for the people of Israel. Where God guides, God provides. He will never lead us to a place where He will not provide our needs.

God's miraculous provision of food and water gave assurance to the people that He would also keep His promise that they "should go in to possess the land". If He did one, He could, and would, do the other.

What God has already provided should assure us that He will provide what He

has not yet provided.

They praised God because He was merciful despite their rebellion

Ne 9:16 But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments,

Instead of humbling themselves as they should have, the people of Israel "proudly" resisted God and refused to obey His "commandments".

Shockingly, despite God's goodness to the people of Israel, they behaved badly.

They "hardened" their necks, which means they stubbornly refused to obey God (cf. Acts 7:51-52). The thought comes from how an ox would stubbornly refuse to obey the farmer. In such cases, the farmer would use an ox goad (cf. Acts 9:5). The pain from the goad would persuade the resistant animal to obey.

Ne 9:17 And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not.

Despite God's marvelous care, the Jews continued to disobey and walk their own way.

They were not the last to abuse God's goodness. Every day, all around the world, billions are devouring the good things of God while treating Him badly.

The people of Israel turned from Moses and appointed their own leader. Most commentators believe this refers to Numbers 14:1-4. However, since the next verse speaks of a molten calf, I believe it is referring to Exodus 32:1-11.

By rejecting God's chosen representative, they were rejecting God and His plan. They desired to return to the "bondage" of Egypt. The flesh of man always desires the bondage of the world.

Despite the arrogant attitude of the Jews, God was ready to forgive them and show them mercy.

Ne 9:18 Yea, when they had made them a molten calf, and said, This is thy God that brought thee up out of Egypt, and had wrought great provocations;

As impossible as it is to imagine, while Moses was getting God's law at the top of Mount Sinai, the people were at the foot of the mountain, convincing Aaron to mold a "calf" that they might worship. They went so far as to attribute the mighty works of God to that dead, and powerless, hunk of gold.

The word "provocations" means "blasphemy". To blaspheme is to speak with contempt about God or to be defiantly irreverent.

Ne 9:19 Yet thou in thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness: the pillar of the cloud departed not from them by day, to lead them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by night, to shew them light, and the way wherein they should go.

Even when they turned from God to a molten calf, God did not forsake them. He continued to direct them with the "cloud". It was a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. There was not a second of any day that they were without the presence of their loving God. When the heat of the day made them weary, God was ahead of them, showing them the way and assuring them they were not alone. When the darkness of night became scary and cold, God gave them the pillar of fire to warm and direct them.

Despite their rejection of God and His plan, He continued to lead them to the land He had promised (Ex. 6:8). Man may break his promise, but God never does

Ne 9:20 Thou gavest also thy good spirit to instruct them, and withheldest not thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst.

God instructed them by giving His spirit through Moses and later, Joshua. God's spirit is a "good spirit" (Ps. 143:10).

God continued to provide the manna and water until the day they entered the Promised Land (Josh. 5:12).

Ne 9:21 Yea, forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness, so that they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not.

The word "sustain" means "to maintain". For "forty years," God made sure their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell.

The heat of the desert often causes feet to swell from a condition called heat edema. The blood vessels dilate, which causes fluid to gather around the feet and ankles.

God not only provided their every necessity, but He also protected them from the common dangers of the desert.

They praised God because He gave them the land of promise

Ne 9:22 Moreover thou gavest them kingdoms and nations, and didst divide them into corners: so they possessed the land of Sihon, and the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan.

God gave them "kingdoms and nations" means He gave the Jews the land of those who inhabited the land.

The word "divide" refers to how God divided the land into sections for each of the tribes of Israel. The word "corners" means "extremity" and refers to the outermost parts of each section. In other words, God divided the land in a way so that nothing went to waste.

God never wastes anything. A perfect example is when Jesus had the disciples gather the leftovers (Jn. 6:12).

Ne 9:23 Their children also multipliedst thou as the stars of heaven, and broughtest them into the land, concerning which thou hadst promised to their fathers, that they should go in to possess it.

God did as He had promised Abraham and made his seed in number as the stars of heaven (Gen. 12:5; 22:17). Even in the harshness of their Egyptian bondage, the people of Israel multiplied (cf. Ex. 1:7, 12). Despite the extreme conditions of forty years in the wilderness (Dt. 8:15) and the older generation dying out (Num. 32:13), they still multiplied in number.

Ne 9:24 So the children went in and possessed the land, and thou subduedst before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gavest them into their hands, with their kings, and the people of the land, that they might do with them as they would.

The word "Canaanites" is used here to refer to all the people who were living in the land of Canaan, which was on the east side of the Mediterranean Sea. This was part of the land God had promised Abraham and his seed.

They "possessed the land" means Israel went in, defeated the inhabitants, took over their homes and businesses, and kept their belongings. This seems unfair to

us, but we must remember that the Canaanites were wicked and vile, and God was using Israel to judge them for their sin. They deserved what they were getting.

The word "subduedst" means "to humiliate". The victory of Israel was so overwhelming that it was an embarrassment to those who lived in the land.

Everyone from the "kings" to the common "people" of the land was defeated. God gave total victory.

Ne 9:25 And they took strong cities, and a fat land, and possessed houses full of all goods, wells digged, vineyards, and oliveyards, and fruit trees in abundance: so they did eat, and were filled, and became fat, and delighted themselves in thy great goodness.

God gave the Jews a land that had already been cultivated and was productive. They did not have to plow the fields or plant the "vineyards" or "oliveyards". The land was already producing when they entered.

The Jews were able to "eat", be "filled", and become "fat" on crops they did not have to plant.

The word "delighted" means "to live voluptuously". A good ole' North Carolina redneck would say, "They were eating high on the hog".

Whether they recognized it or not, their victory in the land was because of the "great goodness" of God. They could claim no credit; it was God.

They praised God because He continued to work with them when they disobeyed

Ne 9:26 Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations.

To "cast" the law of God "behind their backs" speaks of a contempt for, and a total disobedience to, God's law. They stubbornly refused to submit to God's will.

One of Israel's greatest sins was how they treated God's "prophets". They not only ignored their message, but they also put some of them to death. Tradition tells us Zechariah, Uriah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and Amos were all put to death. Jezebel had many prophets put to death (1 Kg. 18:4).

However, silencing the messenger did not do away with God's message. God's Word lived on. The word "testified" means "to charge or admonish". It carries with it the idea of repeating. In other words, these prophets were simply repeating to Israel what God had said to them. God sent His men to rebuke them for their disobedience and warn them of His coming judgment if they refused to repent.

One of God's greatest acts of mercy is when He warns those who are wayward. He warns us that He might not have to discipline us. He does not enjoy disciplining His children, but He loves them too much to not chasten them (Heb. 12:6). The cost of living in sin is high, and our Father does not want us to pay that price.

Ne 9:27 Therefore thou deliveredst them into the hand of their enemies, who vexed them: and in the time of their trouble, when they cried unto thee, thou heardest them from heaven; and according to thy manifold mercies thou gavest them saviours, who saved them out of the hand of their enemies.

The word "deliveredst" means, because of their disobedience, there had been times when God was compelled to turn the people of Israel over to their "enemies". The 70 years of Babylonian captivity were an example that should

have been fresh on the minds of the people who were gathered (cf. 9:1).

But, thank the Lord, when they "cried" unto God, He heard them.

God gave them "saviours" meaning He sent them men to assist them in their struggles. Othniel, Ehud, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Moses, and Joshua were perfect examples (Judg. 3:9, 15). God still sends people to help His children (Eph. 4:11-12). He equips them with His Word and His Spirit to communicate the truth that will change their lives for the good.

Ne 9:28 But after they had rest, they did evil again before thee: therefore leftest thou them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had the dominion over them: yet when they returned, and cried unto thee, thou heardest them from heaven; and many times didst thou deliver them according to thy mercies;

This verse speaks of the vicious cycle of Israel sinning, God judging, Israel repenting, God forgiving, and Israel sinning again. The book of Judges is an example of this horrible time in Israel's history. Time after time, God had mercy and forgave.

These facts tell us two things.

One, when left to themselves, people will always do the wrong thing.

The people of Israel repeatedly returned to their sin. In spite of God's goodness, the time came when they allowed their flesh to control their attitude and actions.

Two, God does not change.

God will judge sin no matter who is guilty. The people of Israel were God's chosen people, but He judged them when they disobeyed.

God will forgive no matter what the offense. When "they returned, and cried" unto the Lord, He forgave them. Even though the people of Israel continued to turn back to their sin, God forgave them when they repented.

The phrase, "and many times didst thou deliver them according to thy mercies" is one of the sweetest statements in the Bible. Many times, they sinned, and many times, God granted them mercy.

Ne 9:29 And testifiedst against them, that thou mightest bring them again unto thy law: yet they dealt proudly, and hearkened not unto thy commandments, but sinned against thy judgments, (which if a man do, he shall live in them;) and withdrew the shoulder, and hardened their neck, and would not hear.

God continued to send prophets in an attempt to "bring them again" unto His law. He simply wanted a people who were willing to obey Him and walk in His will. Considering all He had done for them, that was not too much to ask. Paul tells us God's demands of His children are "reasonable" (Rom. 12:1-2).

They "dealt proudly" means, instead of admitting their condition and repenting, they became even more bold in their rebellion.

The phrase, "withdrew the shoulder" comes from a stubborn ox that pulls away from being placed in a yoke.

Ne 9:30 Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear: therefore gavest thou them into the hand of the people of the lands.

The word "forbear" has the idea of drawing. It is used in the Song of Solomon where the young woman says, "Draw me" (Song 1:4). God, patiently and lovingly, continued to draw the people of Israel to Himself. Unfortunately, they rejected His

wooing.

God sent "prophets" to warn the people. Sadly, they ignored their warning. For this reason, God turned them over into the hands of the "people of the lands".

The "spirit", though spelled with lower-case letters, refers to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did not permanently indwell the Old Testament saint, but He did come and go to perform that which God sent to accomplish.

In a response to their rebellion, God "gavest them into the hand of the people of the lands".

Ne 9:31 Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God.

In mercy, God did not allow their enemies to "utterly consume them". The nation of Israel, then and now, is nothing short of a miracle. It has survived as no other nation in the history of mankind.

The story of Israel's survival is not short of miraculous. The following facts are proof of a God who is keeping His promise to bless the children of Abraham.

One, they have endured the affliction of the Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Assyrians, Babylonians, and the Holocaust.

Two, millions of Jews have moved all around the world without losing their Jewish identity.

Three, they built a productive and modern nation in a desolate land.

Four, the population of Israel was approximately 650,000 in 1948 and 10.1 million in 2025.

God has protected His New Testament church in much the same way He had Israel. She has endured great persecution for many years. Many believers have lost their lives for what they believe, but the church still stands. Jesus is keeping his promise to build his church (Mt. 16:18). God's "great mercies" still protect His people.

Ne 9:32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

As the prayer was coming to a close, the people asked God for relief. Up to this point, they had asked for nothing. The prayer is 1,199 words long and they prayed 957 words before they asked God for anything. That means 79.8 % of the prayer is praise. I wonder what percent of our prayers are praise and thanks.

They mentioned the difficulty that had come on their "fathers". In their past, God had allowed all of Israel to suffer under Egypt (Ex. 1:8-22), and the ten tribes of Judah to be overcome by the "kings of Assyria" (2 Kg. 15:19; 17:3-5).

They also mentioned the difficulty they were enduring in their present time ("unto this day"). It is important to realize, at that time, the Jews were not an independent nation at that time, but under the control of the Persian Empire. Here, they were asking God to deliver them from this oppression.

When they mentioned their kings, princes, priests, prophets, fathers, and all the people, they were recognizing how widespread their suffering had been. It had not been a small and selected group; all of them had suffered. In verse 34, they will tell us why they all suffered.

They were asking God to realize the difficulty they had and were experiencing, and requesting that He intervene on their behalf. They longed for deliverance. They based their request on the fact that God was a God of "mercy" who would keep His promises ("covenant"). They knew they were asking for something they did not deserve. So it is with every person who ever calls on God for help.

Ne 9:33 Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:

Ezra and the Jews had to admit that they deserved the justice God had "brought upon" them. Sadly, many modern believers who are walking a guilty distance from God are shocked when God sends trouble their way. God chastens those He loves (Heb. 12:6).

True confession is admitting God is right ("done right"), and we have done wrong ("wickedly"). The word "confess" (1 Jn. 1:9) means "to agree". We agree with what God says about a matter.

Confession cleanses the heart and mind of the convicted person and brings forgiveness and restoration of fellowship to God.

Ne 9:34 Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them.

This verse tells us the ones who had suffered (cf. v. 32) were the exact ones who had sinned. Not one person who sinned escaped God's judgment, and not one person who was innocent experienced God's judgment. God always judges rightly.

Ne 9:35 For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works.

Because of His "great goodness", God had given the Jews a "kingdom" and a "large and fat land" (cf. v. 25), but they continued to refuse to serve Him or turn from their "wicked works". Oftentimes, the goodness of God is meant to lead people to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Sadly, it does not always work. Many devour God's blessings and continue in their wickedness. The time will come when God will turn from goodness to chastening.

Ne 9:36 Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it:

God had restored them to the land He had given their ancestors, but they were still under the authority ("servants") of the Persian government.

Ne 9:37 And it yieldeth much increase unto the kings whom thou hast set over us because of our sins: also they have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.

They were forced to pay tribute to the Persian government. Because of their disobedience, they and all they owned were in bondage while living in the land God had given them.

Ne 9:38 And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it.

They not only spoke the words but also wrote them down. They were serious about their commitment to walk with God. It is easy to talk about what we ought

to do, even what we plan to do; it is quite another to do it.

CHAPTER TEN

16. THE PROMISE 10:1-39

Humanly speaking, Nehemiah could have packed his bags and headed back to Persia. The wall was complete, but his job was not yet done. God sent him to repair lives, not just a wall; He wanted to make the Jews a holy people, and He wanted to use Nehemiah to do it.

Chapter 10 is the result of what Nehemiah tells us in Nehemiah 9:38. The people came together as a whole and promised to serve God and keep His law.

Nehemiah recorded the following list of the men who signed an agreement to do so.

Ne 10:1–27 Now those that sealed were, Nehemiah, the Tirshatha, the son of Hachaliah, and Zidkijah, Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, Pashur, Amariah, Malchijah, Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah: these were the priests. And the Levites: both Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel; And their brethren, Shebaniah, Hodijah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, Micha, Rehob, Hashabiah, Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, Hodijah, Bani, Beninu. The chief of the people; Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam, Zatthu, Bani, Bunni, Azgad, Bebai, Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, Ater, Hizkijah, Azzur, Hodijah, Hashum, Bezai, Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai, Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, Meshezabeel, Zadok, Jaddua, Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah, Hoshea, Hananiah, Hashub, Hallohesh, Pileha, Shobek, Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah, And Ahijah, Hanan, Anan, Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

Being a good example, Nehemiah was the first to sign the list.

It is one thing to make a promise; it is quite another to sign a written statement where you promise to do it. These people did; they meant business.

Ne 10:28 And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding;

The "rest of the people" did not sign the written agreement, but they did commit themselves to follow God's law.

Notice, they did not make some vague comment about how they were going to try to improve. They made a very direct promise about some very specific changes they were going to make in their lives.

They promised to separate themselves from the "people of the lands". The people of the lands worshiped false gods and lived wicked lives. We cannot make a real commitment to God without committing to avoid the world. God said, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing" (2 Co 6:17). God wants a separated people (Num. 16:21, 26, 45; Ezra 6:21; Ps. 1:1; Pro. 9:6; Isa. 52:11; Acts 2:40; Rev. 18:4).

Those who made this promise included the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Nethinims (Temple servants cf. 3:26).

Their wives and their children, who were old enough to understand ("having knowledge"), also made these promises to obey God.

Signing this agreement made their promise public and instantly made it more than just some personal and private resolution. This was much more than good intentions. Many have good intentions but never change.

Ne 10:29 They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes;

They "clave to their brethren, their nobles" means the general population joined with the leaders in making the promises listed in the following verses.

They were not playing games with God. They swore to follow God's law with a promise ("oath") which included a "curse" if they failed to do as they promised. This means, they were asking God to judge them if they failed to keep their promise.

If their promise to obey was not sufficient to cause them to do as they had agreed, perhaps the fear of the curse would be.

Ne 10:30 And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons:

Part of their commitment was not to intermarry with those of the pagan lands. God forbade intermarriage because He knew it would turn His people away from Him (Ex. 34:15-16; Dt. 7:3-6). Solomon's wives turned his heart from God (1 Kgs. 11:3-4).

If the parents made no other commitment, they should have made this one. They should have loved their children enough to recognize the danger of people who did not believe and follow the law of their God.

If those parents kept their children from that which was harmful, how much more should the modern parent? This world is full of that which will destroy the heart, mind, and life of our children and grandchildren. They will not appreciate it, but loving parents must protect their children from the sin of the world.

Ne 10:31 And if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt.

They committed themselves to observing the Sabbath as God had directed (Ex. 20:8-11; 23:12). They refused to buy or sell goods, or transact business, on the Sabbath.

This has become a major issue in our day. Sunday is not the Sabbath, but it is the Lord's day. For many businesses, Sunday is their busiest day of the week. It takes faith for the Christian business owner to close on Sunday.

They also promised to let the land lie dormant every seventh year as God had demanded (Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:4). Since their crops were the means of their food, letting the land lie dormant for a year was an act of faith. They had to trust God to provide, and He did.

Letting the land lie dormant was also a wonderful testimony. The heathen world around them saw how God provided for His people even though they went an entire year without planting and reaping.

These were practical changes they made to their everyday life. They were

making God's Word the standard they would live by. The Scripture (Ps. 17:4; 119:105) and the Spirit (Jn. 14:26; 16:13) should be our road map to life.

Ne 10:32 Also we made ordinances for us, to charge ourselves yearly with the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God;

They committed themselves to supporting the Temple by giving financially. The Temple, like any business, takes money to operate.

God has always used His people to provide for the financial needs of His work. He doesn't need or want the world to provide for His work on earth. God uses his people to provide for his work.

King Artaxerxes assisted Nehemiah with some of the finances needed to rebuild the wall (Neh. 2:4, 7-9), but he was the one who asked Nehemiah if there was any need. Nehemiah did not ask first.

When His people give as God leads, the needs of the church will be met. He used offerings from His people to build and maintain the Tabernacle and Temple (Mal. 3:10), and the church (Acts 2:44-45; 1 Cor. 16:2; Gal. 6:6). Whether pastor's salary, bills for upkeep, missionaries, or radio broadcasts, the tithes and offerings provide for all the needs of the church.

As their giving provided that which was necessary for the sacrifices, our giving provides what is needed that the lost can come to church and get saved.

Their giving provided the means whereby they could worship at the Temple. Their giving was actually the first step in their worship. When Abraham was about to give his son, he said he was going to "worship" (Gen. 22:5).

God said He wanted His people to give "willingly" (Ex 25:2; 35:5). God loves a "cheerful" giver (2 Cor. 9:7). Every believer should accept their responsibility and gladly give. Our voluntary and liberal giving shows our love for God and His work.

Ne 10:33 For the shewbread, and for the continual meat offering, and for the continual burnt offering, of the sabbaths, of the new moons, for the set feasts, and for the holy things, and for the sin offerings to make an atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.

The money they gave helped maintain the continual need of the Temple.

Ne 10:34 And we cast the lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, after the houses of our fathers, at times appointed year by year, to burn upon the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law:

They cast "lots" to determine which family ("houses of our fathers") would bring the "wood" that was needed for the burnt sacrifices. Seeing that the fire upon the altar was to never go out (Lev. 6:12-13), a lot of wood was needed.

The casting of lots was a method used to determine the will of God in the Old (Josh. 14:1-2; 1 Sam. 14:38-43; 1 Chr. 25:8-31) and New Testaments (Jn. 1:7; Acts 1:26). They believed God controlled the lots and revealed His will by making them fall a certain way (Ps. 22:18; Pro. 16:33; Lev. 16:8; 1 Chr 24:5; Acts 1:26; Mt. 27:35; Jn. 1:7).

Ne 10:35 And to bring the firstfruits of our ground, and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, unto the house of the LORD:

They promised to bring the "firstfruits" of their crops and fruit trees to give once a year as an offering.

The firstfruits were the first and the best of their crops. They had labored long

and hard and were excited about the crops coming in. But, they willingly gave that which was harvested. After all, God had provided it, He deserved to the first and the best.

All through Scripture, we are taught the fact that God deserves our first and our best (Gen. 4:4; Lev. 23:10; Pro. 3:9; Mt. 6:33; 23:26; 1 Cor. 16:1). Paul said, "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men" (Col 3:23).

Ne 10:36 Also the firstborn of our sons, and of our cattle, as it is written in the law, and the firstlings of our herds and of our flocks, to bring to the house of our God, unto the priests that minister in the house of our God:

They promised to bring the "firstborn", their "sons".

This giving of the firstborn male was to be a reminder of how God spared the firstborn of Israel the night He brought them out of Egypt (Ex. 13:14). These firstborn males were to be consecrated to God instead of being slain as in Egypt.

Before God established the priesthood through Aaron (Ex. 28:1-3), the firstborn male of each family was to serve as priest for his family (Ex. 13:2).

As mentioned, God deserves our first and best. This is also true of the children born. The firstborn of males belonged to God to be given as a servant of the priesthood (Ex. 13:1-2; 22:29-30; 34:19-20; Num. 3:13).

However, God gave the child's father the option of paying the priest five silver shekels in exchange for giving his son (Num. 18:15-16).

The act of redeeming the firstborn, called "Redemption of the Son", is still practiced in traditional Judaism today.

Jewish custom says the father would hold up his firstborn son before the priest and say, "This is my firstborn son, he is the first issue of his mother's womb, and the Holy One, blessed is He, has commanded me to redeem him". The priest would ask the father if he wants to give or redeem the son. The father would then reply, "I wish to redeem my son. I present you with the cost of his redemption". The father would hand both the son and the money to the priest. The priest would hold the son in his arms, bless him, and hand him back to his father.

We are not told the exact details, but Mary and Joseph did this with Jesus (Lk 2:22-23).

They also promised to give the firstborn of their livestock to the priests as the Old Testament law had demanded.

Ne 10:37 And that we should bring the firstfruits of our dough, and our offerings, and the fruit of all manner of trees, of wine and of oil, unto the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and the tithes of our ground unto the Levites, that the same Levites might have the tithes in all the cities of our tillage.

The people determined that they would bring their "firstfruits" so that the needs of the "priests" might be met. The priests were to serve God and trust Him to provide for their needs.

The detail of their giving is seen here in that they gave of their "dough", their "trees", their "wine" and "oil", and of their "ground". That certainly makes sense because God provided it all.

The "chambers" were rooms near the Temple that were used as storage rooms (cf. 1 Kgs 6:5; 1 Chr 28:11; 2 Chr 31:11; Neh 10:37-39; 12:25; 13:4, 12-13). The goods given were stored until they were needed.

Ne 10:38 And the priest the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites, when the

Levites take tithes: and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes unto the house of our God, to the chambers, into the treasure house.

They committed themselves to God's system of the priests being a descendant of Aaron and of tithing as God directed. God demanded the "priests" be from the sons of Aaron (Moses' brother) who came of the tribe of Levi (Ex. 28:1-43). They were responsible for the sacrifices demanded by God's law.

It's easy to ignore God's method and do things as we please. When we do, we forfeit the peace and power of God in our lives.

The "Levites" were descendants of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob whom God chose to be His servants (Num. 3:6-13; 8:14; Dt. 18:5). They were responsible for maintaining the temple. They conducted the services held there by doing the teaching (1 Chr. 25:1-6) and singing (2 Chr. 29:25-30), they kept the temple clean (2 Chr. 29:3-6), they guarded the temple (1 Chr. 9:17-34), and they provided the wood and other items needed for the sacrifices (Neh. 10:34-35).

God instructed that there was to be a priest present when the offerings were brought to make sure they were used as God had instructed. The modern church is wise to have a system of financial accountability. It is, however, sad that a guard was needed in the house of God to make sure nothing was mishandled.

A "tithe of the tithes" means the Levites were to tithe of what they had received. In other words, the Levites, having received a tenth of all the produce of the land, were to give a tenth of this to the priests (cf. Num. 18:26). Tithing involves giving of all income.

Ne 10:39 For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the corn, of the new wine, and the oil, unto the chambers, where are the vessels of the sanctuary, and the priests that minister, and the porters, and the singers: and we will not forsake the house of our God.

They promised to bring the offerings to the storage rooms (chambers) to be distributed to the Levites and priests when needed.

They promised not to "forsake the house" of God. They recognized the importance of caring for God's house. Not giving to the house of God is forsaking His work.

Those who refuse to give to God's work are guilty of enjoying the benefits of God's house without contributing to it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

17. THE POPULATION 11:1-12:26

Chapter eleven describes the details of populating the city of Jerusalem. A city, or country, is only as good as the people who live there.

Thanks to the leadership of Nehemiah, the people had helped to rebuild the wall and, at least, part of the city of Jerusalem. As would be expected, most of those who worked on the wall had returned to their homes in the smaller towns that surrounded Jerusalem.

This chapter tells us how 10 percent of the people moved into the city of Jerusalem. That means, entire families moved into a totally different environment

than what they were used to.

The list of those who moved in was detailed and precise. God never does anything haphazardly.

As we will discover, some willingly made the move into Jerusalem while others were reluctant.

WHY WERE SOME RELUCTANT TO MOVE INTO JERUSALEM

Some of the people simply did not want to move, Why?

- Because of difficulty

Most of those living in the towns, villages, and countryside around Jerusalem already had their houses and land. However, the city of Jerusalem had become little more than a ghost town during the seventy years the Jews were in Babylonian Captivity. During the eighty years or so that the captivity had ended, the Temple and wall had been rebuilt, but many of the houses in the city were in shambles. Moving into Jerusalem meant they would have to build a new house or restore an existing one. Either one was difficult.

In like fashion, many refuse to serve God because it isn't easy.

- Because of duty

Moving into Jerusalem meant leaving the Promised Land that God had given them. The land actually still belonged to God, but He had given each Jewish family a portion (Gen. 15:18; Josh. 1:1-4). Since God had taught the Jews to respect that land and to never sell it (Lev. 25:23), moving away was not something they took lightly.

A dedicated believer recognizes the fact that serving God is a privilege and a pleasure, but it is also our duty.

- Because of desire

Some like country living while others prefer the hustle and bustle of city life. Some refused to move into Jerusalem simply because they did not want to.

Sadly, many of God's children simply do not want to serve Him.

- Because of danger

Some were nervous because of those, like Sanballat, who hated God and His people. They knew an attack was all but certain. By moving into the city, they were exposing themselves and their families to danger.

The fear involved with serving the Lord has kept many from serving Him with all their hearts.

WHY WERE SOME READY TO MOVE INTO JERUSALEM

Some of the people were eager to move, Why?

- Because of desire

As I mentioned, some were excited about moving into the city because they enjoyed city life. To them, it was a pleasure and not a sacrifice. This should remind us of how doing God's will always provides a special pleasure and joy.

A Spirit produced desire to serve and please God can be a great motivator.

- Because of destiny

Some believed it was simply God's will for them to move into Jerusalem. They wanted to be faithful, both as citizens of their country and children of their God. Every believer should get up every morning and report for duty to their heavenly

Commander-in-Chief.

So many fail to realize the fact that God has a specific will for their lives. His plan is the best experience we can have in this life.

- Because of dependence

These believed, despite the danger inside the city, their God would take care of them. They had seen Him work enough that they simply trusted Him.

Few things are more liberating than a God-given assurance. We can trust God, all the time.

- Because of devotion

These, like those who stayed in their homes, believed it was their duty to love and care for the land God had given them. However, they believed moving into Jerusalem was a higher duty and calling. To sacrifice for God's will is the highest of man's duty.

A heart-felt devotion to God and His will can accomplish the impossible.

Ne 11:1 And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities.

Fortunately, some of the "rulers" (leaders) were the first to volunteer to move themselves and their families into Jerusalem. Leadership is always vital in any project, including those ordained of the Lord.

A godly leader is one who has submitted to God and His will (Jn. 5:30; 6:38). A godly leader leads by example (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 1 Th. 1:6), humbly serves God and others (Mk. 10:45; Jn. 13:1), and loves the people they are leading (Jn. 13:1b). A godly leader can be followed without fear. When the wicked rule, the people mourn (Pro. 29:2). All believers should pray earnestly for all leaders (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

Since there were so few willing to move, they "cast lots" (cf. comments on 10:34) to determine who else would move into the city.

As previously mentioned, casting of lots was a method used to determine the will of God in the Old (Josh. 14:1-2; 1 Sam. 14:38-43; 1 Chr. 25:8-31) and New Testaments (Jn. 1:7; Acts 1:26). They believed God controlled the lots and revealed His will by making them fall a certain way (Ps. 22:18; Pro. 16:33; Lev. 16:8; 1 Chr 24:5; Acts 1:26; Mt. 27:35; Jn. 1:7).

Nehemiah had the same problem every local church has today, lack of those who are willing to help. Jesus said, "The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few" (Lk 10:2).

One tenth of the people from other towns in Judah (surrounding Jerusalem) were selected by these lots to move into Jerusalem.

Ne 11:2 And the people blessed all the men, that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem.

The population appreciated and commended those who willingly moved into Jerusalem. They realized how the sacrifice of those who moved provided God's blessing and protection to all the people.

This attitude was unusual to say the least. More often than not, those who are unwilling to sacrifice themselves are unappreciative of those who are. They enjoy

the benefits without appreciating what it costs.

Ne 11:3 Now these are the chief of the province that dwelt in Jerusalem: but in the cities of Judah dwelt every one in his possession in their cities, to wit, Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon's servants.

In the towns surrounding Jerusalem lived the priests, Levites, Nethinims, and Solomon's servants.

In verses 4-19, Nehemiah listed the names of those who moved into Jerusalem.

From the tribe of Judah (v. 4-6).

Ne 11:4-6 And at Jerusalem dwelt certain of the children of Judah, and of the children of Benjamin. Of the children of Judah; Athaiah the son of Uziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalaleel, of the children of Perez; And Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Col-hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of Shiloni. All the sons of Perez that dwelt at Jerusalem were four hundred threescore and eight valiant men.

From the tribe of Benjamin (v. 7-9).

Ne 11:7-9 And these are the sons of Benjamin; Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jesaiah. And after him Gabbai, Sallai, nine hundred twenty and eight. And Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer: and Judah the son of Senuah was second over the city.

From the priests (v. 10-14).

Ne 11:10-14 Of the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joarib, Jachin. Seraiah the son of Hilkiyah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, was the ruler of the house of God. And their brethren that did the work of the house were eight hundred twenty and two: and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashur, the son of Malchiah, And his brethren, chief of the fathers, two hundred forty and two: and Amashai the son of Azareel, the son of Ahasai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer, And their brethren, mighty men of valour, an hundred twenty and eight: and their overseer was Zabdiel, the son of one of the great men.

From the Levites (v. 15-18).

Ne 11:15-18 Also of the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hashub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni; And Shabbethai and Jozabad, of the chief of the Levites, had the oversight of the outward business of the house of God. And Mattaniah the son of Micha, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, was the principal to begin the thanksgiving in prayer: and Bakbukiah the second among his brethren, and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun. All the Levites in the holy city were two hundred fourscore and four.

From the gatekeepers (v. 19).

Ne 11:19 Moreover the porters, Akkub, Talmon, and their brethren that kept the gates, were an hundred seventy and two.

Ne 11:20 And the residue of Israel, of the priests, and the Levites, were in all the cities of Judah, every one in his inheritance.

The other priests, the Levites, and the rest of the people lived where their families' "inheritance" was located. This "inheritance" refers to the portion of the

Promised Land God had given them. They had returned to this land after they were released from the Babylonian exile.

Ne 11:21 But the Nethinims dwelt in Ophel: and Ziha and Gispa were over the Nethinims.

The temple servants (Nethinims) lived in "Ophel", an area south of the temple (cf. 3:26). The overseers of the Nethinims were two men by the names of "Ziha and Gispa".

Ne 11:22 The overseer also of the Levites at Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micha. Of the sons of Asaph, the singers were over the business of the house of God.

The chief officer of the Levites in Jerusalem was "Uzzi".

The "sons of Asaph" were the singers. Asaph, who wrote some of the Psalms (Ps. 50, 73-83), was one of the singers David assigned to sing and play instruments in the Tabernacle (1 Chr. 16:4-7, 31-32).

Ne 11:23 For it was the king's commandment concerning them, that a certain portion should be for the singers, due for every day.

After the Babylonian Captivity, the king assigned the "sons of Asaph" to be the temple singers (cf. v. 22b).

Verses 24-36 give a list of the places where 90 percent of the people lived outside of the city of Jerusalem. Most of the following names mean little to the modern believer, but they are vitally important to the Jew. The Levites and priests had to know they were descendants of Levi (Num. 3:5-10; Ezra 2:62; Neh. 7:63-65). A priest had to know they were a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses (Ex. 28:1).

Ne 11:24–36 And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabeel, of the children of Zerah the son of Judah, was at the king's hand in all matters concerning the people. And for the villages, with their fields, some of the children of Judah dwelt at Kirjath-arba, and in the villages thereof, and at Dibon, and in the villages thereof, and at Jekabzeel, and in the villages thereof, And at Jeshua, and at Moladah, and at Beth-phelet, And at Hazar-shual, and at Beer-sheba, and in the villages thereof, And at Ziklag, and at Mekonah, and in the villages thereof, And at En-rimmon, and at Zareah, and at Jarmuth, Zanoah, Adullam, and in their villages, at Lachish, and the fields thereof, at Azekah, and in the villages thereof. And they dwelt from Beer-sheba unto the valley of Hinnom. The children also of Benjamin from Geba dwelt at Michmash, and Aija, and Beth-el, and in their villages, And at Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah, Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim, Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat, Lod, and Ono, the valley of craftsmen. And of the Levites were divisions in Judah, and in Benjamin.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In 12:1-26, Nehemiah gives a partial list of the spiritual leaders who populated the city of Jerusalem after the Babylonian Captivity. This list begins with those who returned with Zerubbabel some 93 years before Nehemiah (cf. Ezra 2:2; 3:2; 4:2; 5:2). The list continues to include those who returned with Nehemiah and beyond.

The following names that may seem little more than a ghost in the past to the

modern believer have at least three lessons for us.

First, they teach us that every believer in God's family is important (Mt. 10:31; Lk. 12:7). Every person in this list had a job for God. Doing what they were meant to do was important to the whole of God's work.

Second, they teach how temporary the things of earth are (Ps. 102:26; Mt. 24:35; 1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Cor. 4:18; Jam. 4:14; 1 Jn. 2:17). Each of these names represents a person who came and went. Their time on earth, like ours, was limited. What we do for Christ, we must do quickly.

Third, they teach us the importance of passing the truth of Scripture to the next generation. It was their responsibility to carry forward God's work precisely as He had instructed.

One of the devil's most successful tactics is to water down the teaching of Scripture from one generation to another. Any church on earth is only one generation from compromise. Sadly, so many in the younger generation have no desire for the old way of loving and serving God.

Also, given enough time, every Christian school will turn from its Biblical stand. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Duke, Brown University, and the University of Chicago are just a few that began with Christian principles. No wonder God tells us to "contend" (fight for) for the faith (Jude 3).

Ne 12:1–26 Now these are the priests and the Levites that went up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Amariah, Malluch, Hattush, Shechaniah, Rehum, Meremoth, Iddo, Ginnetho, Abijah, Miamin, Maadiah, Bilgah, Shemaiah, and Joiarib, Jedaiah, Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah, Jedaiah. These were the chief of the priests and of their brethren in the days of Jeshua. Moreover the Levites: Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and Mattaniah, which was over the thanksgiving, he and his brethren. Also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brethren, were over against them in the watches. And Jeshua begat Joiakim, Joiakim also begat Eliashib, and Eliashib begat Joiada, And Joiada begat Jonathan, and Jonathan begat Jaddua. And in the days of Joiakim were priests, the chief of the fathers: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah; Of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan; Of Melicu, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph; Of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai; Of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam; Of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin, of Moadiah, Piltai; Of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan; And of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi; Of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber; Of Hilkiyah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethaneel. The Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan, and Jaddua, were recorded chief of the fathers: also the priests, to the reign of Darius the Persian. The sons of Levi, the chief of the fathers, were written in the book of the chronicles, even until the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib. And the chief of the Levites: Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brethren over against them, to praise and to give thanks, according to the commandment of David the man of God, ward over against ward. Mattaniah, and Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, Akkub, were porters keeping the ward at the thresholds of the gates. These were in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor, and of Ezra the priest, the scribe.

18. **THE PRESENTATION** 12:27-43

Verses 27-43 record the dedication (presentation) of the wall. Nehemiah and the people present to God the wall He had enabled them to build for His glory.

Dedication services are common in our day.

A dedication service is a time of thanking God for what He has provided.

A dedication service recognizes the fact that God has provided that which is needed to carry out His will and work on earth.

A dedication service sets apart a building or object for worship and service to God. In essence, the object is being given back, or presented, to the God who provided it.

A dedication service does not make an object holy or undefiled. It does, however, recognize the fact that the object is to be used only for holy and spiritual activity.

A dedication service is actually a group of people presenting themselves to God in service and support of the building or object that God has provided (Rom. 1:1-2).

Ne 12:27 And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps.

Nehemiah brought the Levites from their towns to Jerusalem to dedicate the wall to God. It was their responsibility to lead the people to worship. It was a time of "gladness", "thanksgivings", and "singing".

Singing and music played a vital part in this dedication service. The wording of this verse tells us the singing and music were upbeat and loud (1 Chr. 15:28; Ps. 33:3; 98:4; 150:4-6). They did not drag through the songs as though they were half asleep. God loves joyful and enthusiastic singing (Gen. 15:1-2; Judges 5:3; 1 Chr. 16:9-10; Ps. 13:6; 33:3; 71:23; 95:1; 98:4-6; 104:33; 147:7; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16b). Zephaniah 3:17 tells us God Himself rejoices over His people with "loud singing".

They had a reason to rejoice. God had used them to overcome their enemies, rebuild the wall, and restore the city of Jerusalem. In like fashion, the modern church has reason to rejoice. Despite our opposition, God has worked many mighty works; He has been good to His people.

Ne 12:28 And the sons of the singers gathered themselves together, both out of the plain country round about Jerusalem, and from the villages of Netophathi;

The people from the towns surrounding Jerusalem gathered together to sing songs of praise and thanks to the God who had done so many wonderful things for them.

Ne 12:29 Also from the house of Gilgal, and out of the fields of Geba and Azmaveth: for the singers had builded them villages round about Jerusalem.

These singers built and settled in villages near Jerusalem so that they might be committed to their worship at the Temple. The life of a believer should be built around the local church. Way too often, the church for the modern believer is more of an inconvenience than the focal point of their lives.

Ne 12:30 And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall.

We are not told the specifics of this purification. The Old Testament describes national cleansing (Ex. 19:10-11), priestly cleansing (Lev. 8:6-9), and individual

cleansing for leprosy (Lev. 14:8-9).

We do know, this was more than a robotic ritual. They sincerely searched their hearts and confessed their sin.

Without purity, we will never worship or serve God. Without holiness, "no man shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). The Psalmist said the one who stands in His holy place is the one who has "clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:3-4).

Purity for individuals and for the nation as a whole was needed.

A good example of national sin would be when President Barack Obama (June 26, 2015) had the White House lit with rainbow-colored lights to celebrate the Supreme Court's decision that legalized same-gender marriage and honored LGBT equality. At the time of this writing, as many as 68% of Americans believe same-gender marriage should be legal.

Ne 12:31 Then I brought up the princes of Judah upon the wall, and appointed two great companies of them that gave thanks, whereof one went on the right hand upon the wall toward the dung gate:

Nehemiah divided the priests, Levites, and the princes (magistrates) and the common people into "two great" groups. He organized these groups into two large choirs and directed that they march in opposite directions around the top of the wall. All types of people were included. God opens Himself to all types of people.

They "gave thanks" reveals the attitude of this group. They were excited about what God was doing. They were singing, playing instruments, and rejoicing, as they went (cf. 35-36). They marched in opposite directions until they met at the Temple, where the dedication service of the wall was conducted.

Contrary to the prediction of Tobiah (4:3), their marching on the top of the wall proved its strength.

The first choir

The first choir (12:32–37), led by Ezra, started at the Valley Gate and moved to the right (counterclockwise) along the top of the newly rebuilt wall. They encircled the city and met the second choir at the Temple. The valley gate was where Nehemiah began his first inspection of the wall (2:13-15).

It must have been a special blessing when these individuals passed the part of the wall they had worked on personally.

Ne 12:32–37 And after them went Hoshai, and half of the princes of Judah, And Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam, Judah, and Benjamin, and Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, And certain of the priests' sons with trumpets; namely, Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Michaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph: And his brethren, Shemaiah, and Azarael, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethaneel, and Judah, Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God, and Ezra the scribe before them. And at the fountain gate, which was over against them, they went up by the stairs of the city of David, at the going up of the wall, above the house of David, even unto the water gate eastward.

The second choir

The second choir (12:38-39), led by Nehemiah, also started at the Valley Gate but moved to the left (clockwise) along the top of the newly rebuilt wall. They encircled the city and met the first choir at the Temple.

Ne 12:38–39 And the other company of them that gave thanks went over against them, and I after them, and the half of the people upon the wall, from beyond the tower of the furnaces even unto the broad wall; And from above the gate of Ephraim, and above the old gate, and above the fish gate, and the tower of Hananeel, and the tower of Meah, even unto the sheep gate: and they stood still in the prison gate.

The second group, like the first, "gave thanks" as they went. They "stood still" means they waited for the other group to arrive so that they all might enter the Temple at the same time. What a procession this must have been.

Ne 12:40-42 So stood the two companies of them that gave thanks in the house of God, and I, and the half of the rulers with me: And the priests; Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Michaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; And Maaseiah, and Shemaiah, and Eleazar, and Uzzi, and Jehohanan, and Malchijah, and Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang loud, with Jezrahiah their overseer.

The words "sang loud" refer to volume, but also the clarity of their singing. They sang their words distinctly so that the message might be understood. Every gospel singer could learn a lesson here. If the message is not understood, the singing is useless. True gospel singing has a message from God to people in need.

Jezrahiah appears to be the leader of the singers. A good and godly song leader is vitally important because singing requires organization. The song leader, like the pastor, will often determine the atmosphere of a church service.

Ne 12:43 Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off.

This event would not have been complete without the "great sacrifices" they offered. The sacrifices spoke of God's mercy. The rebuilding of the wall and restoration of Jerusalem certainly were a result of God's mercy.

Once again, we are told of their "great joy". Their rejoicing was real; it wasn't something they worked up; it came from God. They were celebrating more than just the rebuilding of the wall. This occasion marked a new beginning and a new sense of hope with the people of God.

Notice, entire families rejoiced. The Holy Spirit was careful to record that the "wives" and "children" rejoiced. The psalmist said, "Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD, praise ye the LORD" (Ps. 150:6). All of God's people should praise Him.

They had plenty to rejoice about. The city and wall of Jerusalem had been restored and filled with people once again. It had been 150 years since such a thing had happened.

The sound of their singing and rejoicing was heard for miles around. The neighborhood church used to give such a sound as believers sang and rejoiced during their services. What a wonderful testimony it was to a lost and dying world.

Verses 44-45 speak of the results of heartfelt service for the Lord.

Ne 12:44 And at that time were some appointed over the chambers for the treasures, for the offerings, for the firstfruits, and for the tithes, to gather into them out of the fields of the cities the portions of the law for the priests and

Levites: for Judah rejoiced for the priests and for the Levites that waited.

This verse tells us of the steps taken to ensure the support of the Temple. Men were given the oversight of the storage rooms where the gifts were kept. Like any business or household, the finances involved with God's work are vitally important. The spirituality of a church is revealed as much in its bank account as in its pulpit.

Those in the land of "Judah" who gave to provide for the priests and Levites did so not grudgingly, but gladly. They had respect for the items donated and appointed individuals to guard them.

In summary, people who love the Lord will love each other and the house of God, and they will serve Him with joy.

Ne 12:45 And both the singers and the porters kept the ward of their God, and the ward of the purification, according to the commandment of David, and of Solomon his son.

The word "ward" refers to them taking turns in their area of service. Nehemiah did as David and Solomon had done 500 years earlier (1 Chr. 25:1, 25-26), and organized the "singers" and "porters" (gatekeepers) so that they could take turns in their particular area of service. God is organized, and He expects His people to do His work in an organized fashion. Chaos has no place in the house of God.

The ward of "purification" means they recognized the importance of keeping God's work holy and would not allow any unclean person to hold a position in God's house.

In other words, Nehemiah did it the old-fashioned way and walked the old paths (cf. Jer. 6:16). Time should not cause the work of God to change. God never changes, neither should His people or the way they serve Him.

Ne 12:46 For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chief of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving unto God.

David and Asaph lived 500 years before Nehemiah and recognized the importance of the singing and music in God's house. Their songs were songs of "praise and thanksgiving" to God. The words and the music brought glory to God. Many modern churches need to follow the example of David, Solomon, and Nehemiah.

Ne 12:47 And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel, and in the days of Nehemiah, gave the portions of the singers and the porters, every day his portion: and they sanctified holy things unto the Levites; and the Levites sanctified them unto the children of Aaron.

This verse connects Nehemiah with Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel returned to Jerusalem 93 years before Nehemiah. Zerubbabel rebuilt the Temple, and Nehemiah rebuilt the wall, but both had a heart for the work of God and the city of Jerusalem. Both served the Lord in the way God directed them.

When believers truly love the Lord, they love serving Him and will do it with joy. They will see their place of service in the body of Christ as an honor and pleasure, not a burden. When a church has this type of member, it honors God, functions well, and will be a beacon of light in a dark world.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There is an unknown amount of time between the dedication of the Temple and the events described in chapter thirteen. During this time, Nehemiah had returned to Persia and his position under Artaxerxes. When Nehemiah left Jerusalem and returned to Persia, the wall had been rebuilt, the city of Jerusalem had been restored, the Temple was functioning with the storehouses full, people gladly giving offerings, the priests and the Levites joyfully fulfilling their position, and the Spirit of God was working. Unfortunately, things were about to change dramatically.

Chapter 13 (13:6-7) tells us that during Nehemiah's absence from Jerusalem, the people of Judah allowed themselves to break the promises they had made in chapter ten to serve God. Simply put, they had backslidden miserably. When men are left to themselves, they always revert to their ungodly ways.

The Jews had changed, but Nehemiah had not. He had gone back to Persia and lived among its wickedness, but he did not let it change him. God calls on all of His children to live godly in an ungodly world (Titus 2:12).

In this chapter, Nehemiah dealt with at least six problems. The neglect of the Temple (13:1-9), the ceasing of paying tithes (13:10-14), the breaking of the Sabbath (13:15-22), the intermarriage with pagan women (13:23-27), and the corruption of the leadership (13:28-31).

The test of revival is time. The revival described at the beginning of this book was real. It was a work of the Spirit of God and not just an emotional stirring. However, the spiritual commitment that brings revival must continue if revival is to continue.

As bad as this was, at least the people of Judah did not return to idolatry. Their captivity in the pagan and idolatresses land of Babylon had cured them, and they never fell into the sin of idolatry afterwards.

Problem number one (v. 1-9)

The people of Judah had broken their promise (10:31) to honor the house of God.

Ne 13:1 On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever;

The words "On that day" refer to the time when Nehemiah once again returned to Jerusalem (cf. 13:6-7).

As Ezra had done earlier (8:8, 13-17; 9:3), they read God's Law publicly. Once again, hearing the Word of God caused them to evaluate their lives and repent of their sinful behavior.

One subject they found in the Word of God was the fact that God had forbidden an "Ammonite" or "Moabite" to enter the Temple. This refers to fully participating in the spiritual life of Israel.

Ammon and Moab were the incestuous sons of Lot (Gen. 19:30-38). The Ammonites and Moabites had been constant enemies of God's people. The Moabites encouraged the Jews to serve false gods (Num. 25:1-5).

Ne 13:2 Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing.

God forbade the people of Ammon and Moab from entering the Temple for two reasons.

One, because they had refused to aid Israel as they were headed toward the Promised Land (cf. Dt. 23:3-5). They were in fact, hindering the work and will of God by refusing assistance to the people of Israel. God did not take that lightly.

Two, because the Moabites, in an attempt to destroy God's people, "hired Balaam" to curse Israel. Of course, God reversed the curse into a blessing (Num. 22-24).

These two actions show the wicked nature and the hatred the Ammonites and Moabites had for the Jews and their God. Denying the necessities of life (bread and water) and bringing a curse on a group of people that included the extremely young and old was nothing short of inhumane. They were doing all they could to hinder the work of God.

It is important to note that this exclusion of the nations of the Ammonites and Moabites did not apply to individuals. Any individual willing to reject their false gods and turn to Jehovah would be accepted. Ruth was a Moabite, but she turned away from her pagan heritage and turned to God (Ruth 1:16).

Ne 13:3 Now it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude.

When they "heard the law," they were convicted of their failure. The hearing of God's Word can cheer the sad and convict the bad.

They separated from Israel all those who were not true Jews.

This speaks especially to the pagan groups who had intermarried with Israel. They wanted to be a part of Israel but did not want to make a full commitment to God's law.

Sadly, there have always been those who want the benefits God provides without having to dedicate themselves to His will (Jn. 6:2, 26). The same is true today.

Ne 13:4 And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, was allied unto Tobiah:

Eliashib, who was the high priest, was responsible for the oversight of the Temple after Nehemiah had returned to Persia.

The word "allied" means Eliashib had become friends with Tobiah. This is the same Tobiah who had fought against Nehemiah and the Jews earlier (cf. 2:10; 19: 4:3).

The condition of God's house is in trouble when the leaders are companions with those who are ungodly. Eliashib had become a disgrace to his position.

To make matters worse, as we will discover, Eliashib's grandson was married to Tobiah's friend Sanballat's daughter.

Ne 13:5 And he had prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil, which was commanded to be given to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the offerings of the priests.

Eliashib allowed Tobiah to live in one of the storage rooms connected to the Temple.

Tobiah, being a Gentile and an Ammonite, should have never even been allowed to enter, let alone live in, the Temple (Dt. 23:3).

He had failed to defeat the work of God from the outside (2:10,19; 4:3,7; 6:1), so he moved inside. The devil has transformed himself into an angel of light and has his ministers who do his bidding (2 Cor. 11:14-15). He still sows tares among the wheat (Mt. 13:25, 39).

The items used in the worship in the Temple had been kept in this storage room. We will discover later (v. 10-14) that the storage rooms were empty because the people had stopped bringing their offerings.

This is one of the most shocking of all the tragedies in this book. The high priest, the man who was to be the example of godliness, had become friends with the enemy of God and had allowed him to move into the house of God.

Ne 13:6 But in all this time was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king:

Nehemiah tells us he was not in Jerusalem when the events in verses 1-5 took place.

Remember, this book started with Nehemiah being a governor under Artaxerxes for the Persian nation (1:1). He left Persia and came to Jerusalem when he heard about the condition of the wall (2:4-6). After twelve years in Jerusalem, Nehemiah returned to Persia as he had promised Artaxerxes (cf. 2:6).

The events described in verses 1-5 took place while Nehemiah was back in Persia.

After "certain days," Nehemiah convinced King Artaxerxes to let him return to Jerusalem the second time. We are not told how long the "certain days" were before this second visit. We do know that during Nehemiah's absence, there were horrible violations of God's law taking place in and around Jerusalem.

Artaxerxes is called the "king of Babylon" because his rule over Persia included Babylon.

Ne 13:7 And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.

In this verse, Nehemiah tells of how he returned to Jerusalem and discovered the condition of the people of Judah and the Temple.

Ne 13:8 And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber.

The word "grieved" means "to be broken to pieces". Any preacher not grieved over sin in God's house is not worthy to be called a preacher.

I suspect Nehemiah's distress over this situation was worse than when he first heard (1:4) and saw (2:11-17) the broken wall. Those guilty of the violations found in these verses were aware of God's law and knew better than to do what they were doing. Willful disobedience is the worst kind.

Nehemiah "cast" out the "household" belongings of Tobiah. Having his personal belongings in the Temple does not suggest Tobiah was merely using the Temple as his residence. There were plenty of houses in and around Jerusalem that he could have lived in. No doubt, he had some type of influence in the Temple. From this place, Tobiah could easily hinder the work of God while pretending to assist it.

Nehemiah responded to the abuse of the Temple much like Jesus would approximately 480 years later (Mt. 21:12-13; Jn. 2:13-17). He cleansed the Temple of worldly items.

Many modern churches need to recognize this fact and get back to respecting God's house.

Ne 13:9 Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and thither brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense.

Nehemiah commanded that the room be ceremonially cleansed, which restored the holiness of that area. This was God's house and it needed to be respected as such. After the room was clean, the "vessels" used for worship and sacrifice were returned.

For true worship to be restored, the junk had to be removed, and the sacred items had to be returned.

Problem number two (v. 10-14)

The people of Judah had broken their promise (cf. 10:39) to give offerings.

Ne 13:10 And I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given them: for the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field.

This verse tells us why Tobiah had been able to occupy the storage rooms in the first place. The storage rooms were empty because the people had stopped bringing their tithes and offerings to the Temple. Remember, these were the same who had signed a promise saying they would never do this type of thing (cf. 9:38; 10:29-31, 35, 37, 39).

To be honest, we are not told why the people stopped paying their tithes and offerings.

One, it may have been because of their spiritual decline. Giving it certainly one of the first things to go when a person backslides.

Two, it may have been because they were angry that Eliashib had allowed Tobiah to abuse the Temple property.

Whatever their reasoning, their refusal to give displeased God and Nehemiah.

With no tithes and offerings being given, the Levites had to go to their "fields" to earn a living. That meant the work of God was being neglected because the time in their fields took away from their time in the Temple.

There is nothing wrong with a preacher working a job when the church is not able to support him full-time. But it is a shame when he has to work because the church members refuse to give their tithes and offerings. God tells us not to muzzle the ox while it is working (Dt. 25:4; 1 Cor. 9:9; 1 Tim. 5:18). Jesus said the "labourer is worthy of his hire" (Lk. 10:7).

Ne 13:11 Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together, and set them in their place.

Nehemiah used the word "contended" three times in this chapter (v. 11, 17, 25). He rebuked them openly.

Some believe a preacher should always be positive and never harsh. Of course a preacher should love those he speaks to but there are times when rebuke is necessary (Lk. 17:3, 1 Tim. 5:20; Titus 1:13). Jesus rebuked Peter (Mt. 16:22-23). A preacher is to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort" (2 Tim. 4:2).

Ne 13:12 Then brought all Judah the tithe of the corn and the new wine and the oil unto the treasuries.

Once again, God used Nehemiah to change the actions of the people. They brought their tithes and offerings to the house of God.

Their giving of offerings was, as it is with all of God's children, an act of faith. Giving a tenth of ten dollars leaves you with nine. How can we live on nine dollars when living on ten was already difficult? Of course, the answer is simple: we trust God.

Their refusal to give was serious because giving is connected to worship. The Temple functioned, and people were able to worship God, because of what they gave. The same is true of the modern local church. Without the tithes and offerings of people who love the Lord, the church would have to shut down. That means, God's Word would not be heard, God's people would not be helped, the lost would not be saved, and God is not honored.

Giving is an act of obedience, so not giving is disobedience. God calls it robbery (Mal. 3:8-10). A preacher friend of mine says when God has a man's pocketbook, He has the man.

Ne 13:13 And I made treasurers over the treasuries, 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 counted faithful, and their office was to distribute unto their brethren.

Nehemiah did not just talk about the problem; he set out to fix it by appointing trustworthy men to oversee the treasury who were to make certain the corn, new wine, and oil (v. 12) were distributed as needed.

We should not miss the fact that Nehemiah stayed faithful through some very difficult times. In a time of spiritual decline among many, we should be truly thankful for those who are staying faithful. It may seem like it at times, but everyone hasn't quit God.

Ne 13:14 Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices thereof.

As he had done so many times before, Nehemiah turned to prayer. He asked God to "remember" him three times in this chapter (v. 14, 22, 31). He prayed for himself. As we have seen, no matter what the problem, Nehemiah knew he needed God to do what he could not do himself.

His "good deeds" refer to what God had done in Jerusalem by his being obedient. God had used Nehemiah to change Jerusalem and the land of Judah dramatically. Of course, he did not want to see it come to nought. Seeing the improvements in Jerusalem taken away would be worse than never seeing them at all. Paul had the same attitude when he told the Galatians, "I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain" (Ga. 4:11).

Problem number three (v. 15-22)

The people had also broken their promise (cf 10:31) to keep the "sabbath".

Ne 13:15 In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, 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.

Nehemiah saw that the people were working on the Sabbath as they would any other day of the week. They had become more interested in their commerce than their commitment. Nehemiah spoke out against their failure. It was too important a matter to ignore.

Ne 13:16 There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

The people were transacting business (buying fish and other goods) with the "men of Tyre" on the Sabbath. The men of Tyre imported fish from the Mediterranean Sea.

Since the men of Tyre claimed no commitment to God, His law, or the Temple, it was no surprise that they gave no respect to the Sabbath. However, the people of God were bound by God, His law, and the Temple. Their neglect of the Sabbath was a major infraction of God's law.

Seeing a lost person mowing on Sunday is one thing, but a believer doing the same is something else.

Ne 13:17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day?

Nehemiah "contended", which means "to rebuke", with the "nobles" (leaders) of Judah. He discussed the matter with those who could do something about the issue.

The word "evil" means "to spoil". The word "profane" means "to defile". It is a word that is connected to the word prostitute. Both of these words show us they had taken that which God intended for good and made it something bad.

Ne 13:18 Did not your fathers thus, 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.

Nehemiah reminded them of how God had judged their ancestors by sending them into the 70-year Babylonian Captivity for doing exactly what they were now doing (Jer. 17:19-27). That captivity had caused all the "evil" (troubles) they were experiencing at this time.

It is sad when children do not learn when they see their parents making unwise decisions.

Ne 13:19 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 set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day.

Nehemiah commanded that the gates be closed and guards be stationed on Friday evening to keep the merchants out. The gates were to be kept closed throughout the Sabbath.

The "burdens" refer to the goods the merchants would bring into the city to sell.

Ne 13:20 So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice.

The "merchants and sellers", being reluctant to lose their business, stayed outside the wall for one or two nights. No doubt, they were hoping the people of Judah would sneak out and buy their goods.

The people had been good customers, and they were not going to give up on them so easily. When the devil gains ground, he always wants more.

Ne 13:21 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.

To "testify" means "to protest". Nehemiah spoke directly to the merchants who had brought their goods to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's response was ever harsher than before. This time, he threatened to "lay hands" on them if they continued to sell on the Sabbath. He was not playing games with them.

Nehemiah's message got through, for the merchants never sold their goods on the Sabbath again. They were convinced to do so, not because Nehemiah frightened them, but because the Spirit of God was at work.

Ne 13:22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.

As was his habit, Nehemiah not only rebuked them for their sin, but he also did what was needed to fix the problem.

Once again, we see Nehemiah turning to the Lord in prayer. He acknowledged the "greatness" of God's "mercy".

Praying words that give assurance and enhance our faith are wise. The Psalms contain prayers that do so.

(Ps 31:14) But I trusted in thee, O LORD: I said, Thou art my God.

(Ps 43:5) ... Hope in God: for I shall yet praise him, *Who is* the health of my countenance, and my God.

Problem number four (v. 23-27)

The people of Judah had broken their promise (cf. 10:30) not to marry into pagan

nations.

Ne 13:23 In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab:

Nehemiah discovered that some of the people of Judah had intermarried with the pagan people of the land.

God had made it clear that He wanted His people to stay separate from other nations (Ex. 34:12-17; Lev. 19:19; Dt. 7:1-4). He even forbade that they plow with an ox and a donkey (Dt. 22:10). He wanted a nation separated from the world and its pagan beliefs.

God also tells the New Testament believer to stay separate from the world. He said, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness" (2 Co 6:14), and "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you" (2 Co 6:17).

Ne 13:24 And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people.

Being married to foreigners meant their children would speak only the language of their mothers. The Jewish mothers taught their children Hebrew, while the foreign mothers taught their children their native language. That meant about half the children could not speak Hebrew.

Not knowing Hebrew would keep those children from associating with the Jews. More importantly, it would keep them from understanding God's law and from worshipping God. That meant not knowing Hebrew would cut them off from the true God.

Ne 13:25 And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.

Verses 25-27 record Nehemiah's words of rebuke to those who were guilty.

The word "contended" means "strive" and carries with it the idea of defending.

The words "cursed them" mean Nehemiah asked God to judge them.

And "smote certain of them" means Nehemiah had the worst offenders punished by whipping (cf. Dt. 25:2).

The words "plucked off their hair" are from one Hebrew word that means "to make bald". It could mean their heads were shaved or their hair was literally pulled out like plucking a chicken. Either way, this was a great disgrace for the hair was a symbol of freedom, masculinity, and maturity. Removing a man's hair stripped them of their dignity (cf. 2 Sam. 10:4).

Nehemiah compelled them to reaffirm their previous promise (10:30) and not allow their sons and daughters to marry into pagan families.

Nehemiah stood his ground and would not budge an inch. He knew this was not a time for compromise. His actions were not based on prejudice; he knew these pagan wives would draw their husbands and children away from God.

This intermarriage could have easily led to the assimilation of Judah into the

world. God had sent Nehemiah back to Jerusalem to keep that from happening.

Nehemiah's actions were extreme, but they were not from a man who had lost his temper or was out of control. Like Jesus when he cleansed the Temple by casting out the moneychangers and overturning their tables (Mt. 21:12-13), Nehemiah saw the damage and disgrace of God's people living in opposition to God's will. He also knew that they would stay under the judgment of God and His blessings would not return until they confessed and repented.

Many modern believers expect a preacher to stay calm and not get emotional about the carnal attitude and actions of God's people. I believe any preacher who can remain undisturbed about the condition of the church of today needs to examine whether he has really been called.

God never tolerates nor ignores sin. He did not ignore Adam's sin even though He knew judging him would plunge all humanity into depravity. He did not ignore the sin laid upon His own Son (Isa. 53:3-4, 11) as he took the sin of the world upon himself (1 Pet. 2:24). If there was ever a time when God would have ignored sin, it would have been when it meant judging His own Son. Yet, He did not.

Ne 13:26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin.

Nehemiah spoke of "Solomon" as an example of the results of intermarriage. Despite his God-given wisdom (1 Kgs. 3:10-13), Solomon foolishly went after many women of other nations (1 Kgs. 11:1-4), and eventually did evil in the sight of the Lord (1 Kgs. 11:6) as a result.

Like Solomon, the people of Judah would pay for their disregard for God's law.

Ne 13:27 Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?

Nehemiah continued his rebuke by asking them if they thought he and the rest of God's people should follow their example and marry pagan wives.

Nehemiah, like Paul (Rom. 6:1-2), asked a ridiculous question to make an obvious point. Of course, following the sinful example of the people of Judah would be foolish and harmful. Nehemiah's question was meant to demonstrate just how ludicrous it is to do that which God forbids.

Problem number five (v. 28-30)

The people of Judah had broken their promise (10:38-39) about godly leadership.

Ne 13:28 And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me.

The sin of marrying into pagan families had spread into the priesthood. Eliashib, the High Priest, had a grandson who married the daughter of Sanballat. The Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us this grandson was a priest named Manasseh.

Of course, Sanballat was the one who had vehemently opposed Nehemiah and the work on the wall (2:10, 19; 4:7-8; 6:1-2). God had strictly forbidden that

anyone in the priesthood marry outside the Jewish race (Lev. 21:14).

Nehemiah knew Sanballat had not changed and was trying to use his daughter's marriage to defile God's people and His work. It takes a pretty low man to misuse his own daughter in such a manner.

Nehemiah removed Eliashib's grandson from his priesthood and forced him to leave the Temple property and probably the city of Jerusalem. He meant to clean house.

Ne 13:29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites.

As so many times before, we see Nehemiah praying. This time, he asked God to judge them, for they were guilty. This was another imprecatory prayer. Notice my earlier comments about imprecatory prayers (4:4).

Ne 13:30 Thus cleansed I them from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business;

This cleansing, like earlier (12:30), included a ceremonial cleansing.

The "wards" refer to the divisions of the priests. God led David to organize the priests and Levites into 24 rotating divisions to serve in the Temple (1 Chr. 24-25). That means they took turns doing their service. We see an example of this with Zacharias (Lk. 1:8-9), whose "order of service" was to burn incense in the Temple.

Organizing the service in the Temple was wise for the following reasons.

One, it assured the necessary tasks were done. Each task had been assigned to a particular person at a particular time. Without organization in the work of God, there will be chaos. God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33). Paul said, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). Jesus spoke about having our lives organized (Lk. 14:28-30).

Two, it allowed each priest or Levite to serve, which made sure no one was left out. God wants all of His children to serve Him. He has given every believer certain spiritual gifts which enable them to serve Him (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 7:7, 17; 12:11, 18; 2 Cor. 10:13; Eph. 4:7).

Three, it made sure that no person serving would be overworked or exhausted. Even in God's service, the tendency is for some to do nothing while others are overworked. The average church has a few who are carrying the load, while the rest simply enjoy the ride.

Four, it provided a way to make sure those who served in the Temple were spiritually qualified.

There are certain areas of the service to God that He has established requirements for (1 Tim. 3:1-7; 2 Tim. 2:24-25). Anyone not meeting God's requirements is not qualified for that particular area of service. For example, Nehemiah himself was not qualified for priestly service in the Temple because he was not a descendant of Aaron.

We need to accept these qualifications and not resist God's plan. God will not bless the man, or the ministry, of those who fail to meet these qualifications.

Being disqualified in one area of service does not exclude a person from serving God. A man who has been married more than once can not be a pastor or deacon, but he certainly can serve God in many other ways.

The people of Judah had broken their promise (10:34-35) about collecting the wood for the burnt offerings.

Ne 13:31 And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

The last command of Nehemiah was that the wood for the burnt offerings be collected as needed.

Nehemiah's last act in his great work of rebuilding the wall and restoring the spiritual condition of God's people was one that, at first glance, seems a meager one. Of all his mighty works, making sure firewood was collected seems very insignificant.

However, the importance of this task lies in the fact of what would happen if no one did it. With no wood, there would be no fire for the altar. With no fire, there could be no sacrifice. With no sacrifice, there could be no atonement for sin. Some of the smallest tasks have the greatest importance.

Nehemiah ends this book by praying the words "remember me". This was the third time he prayed these words (13:14, 22, 31).

He asks God to remember him "for good". He does so, not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of that which God was doing in his life and in the people of God. Nehemiah was a man whom God could trust with that type of prayer request. Many would ask God for good for selfish reasons. They want God's blessings without His demands.

These are the type whom James says will not have their prayers answered because they "consume it upon" their own lusts (Jam. 4:3). God is not our Genie in the bottle who grants our every wish and asks nothing in return.

Having served God faithfully while under the authority of King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah willingly left his position in Persia to do the Lord's will in Jerusalem.

What a difference it would be if more believers had such a burden and zeal for God's work in our day.

CONCLUSION

As we conclude the book of Nehemiah, it is my prayer that this study has changed us. Nehemiah taught us how to live the Christian life on a daily basis.

We learned about Nehemiah's desire (1:1-4).

He longed to see the wall of Jerusalem restored to that which God desired. He didn't wait for someone else to do it; he listened to God and did it himself.

We learned about Nehemiah's discernment (1:4).

Nehemiah was burdened about the condition of the wall and knew something needed to be done, but he did not simply set out to do it himself. He prayed and fasted that he might know the Lord's will for him. His life teaches us the importance being sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

We learned about Nehemiah's dependence (1:5).

There are two ways Nehemiah showed his dependence was on God and not man. First, he prayed. All the way through this book, we are told how Nehemiah prayed (1:5-11; 2:4; 4:4-5, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31b). Second, he trusted in the Word of God (8:1-8).

We learned about Nehemiah's defense (2:19-20; 4:1-15).

When the opposition came, Nehemiah did not give in or give up. He trusted God and did what was right.

We learned about Nehemiah's dedication (3:1-32; 4:10).

The job of rebuilding the wall was difficult, but Nehemiah did not let it get the best of him. He stayed dedicated to the cause and kept working. When the workers got tired (4:10), Nehemiah encouraged them and continued the work.

We learned about Nehemiah's delight.

He said, "the joy of the LORD is your strength" (8:10). Nehemiah understood the importance of rejoicing and joy (12:31-39).

We learned about Nehemiah's disappointment (13:1- 31).

When the people of Judah fell back into their old habits of sin, it broke Nehemiah's heart, but he dealt with it and kept walking with God.

And so, we conclude our thoughts on the book of Nehemiah. May our walk through this book make a difference in our daily walk with our Lord.