

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Intro: The events given in this book follow the events given to us in the book of Ezra. And by comparing the date given for Ezra's departure from Babylon to Jerusalem in Ezra 7:7 with the date for Nehemiah's departure for Jerusalem in Neh. 1:1, we see that Nehemiah followed Ezra 13 years later.

The book of Ezra describes, as we have seen, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. The book of Nehemiah describes the rebuilding of the walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem. Neh. 6:15 records the completion of the wall. The year was probably 445 B.C. The events in the book of Nehemiah cover approximately 12 years. Cf. 1:1 with 13:6.

The first seven chapters are recorded in the first person, Nehemiah himself giving the account. From chapter 8 to the latter part of chapter 12 we have what one commentator calls, "another voice" (Kidner, p. 77). Then in 12:31 Nehemiah picks up the story, and finishes the book.

Nehemiah does not appear at all in the book of Ezra, but Ezra appears in the book of Nehemiah—but only in two chapters: 8 and 12. Cf. 8:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 13; 12:1, 13, 26, 33, 36.

We learn from Neh. 5:14 that Nehemiah had been appointed governor of Judah during the whole time occupied by this book. And 12:26 mentions also that Nehemiah was the governor, and that Ezra was the priest and scribe. So while both were godly men, and spiritual leaders, it seems that Nehemiah was more the political leader while Ezra took care of the priestly matters.

The account in the book begins with the return of Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, to Babylon, and Nehemiah's inquiry as to the condition of the people who had returned from exile, and about the city of Jerusalem. And so the account begins with

I. NEHEMIAH'S INQUIRY (Neh. 1:1, 2).

We need to think of Nehemiah's inquiry as having to do with the work of the Lord in Jerusalem. It was as though someone were to meet any one of us on the street, and, in the course of the conversation would ask, "How is the work of the Lord going at Trinity?" Our answers would probably differ according to the perspective that we have of the work. I was asked that very question this past week by a man who used to attend Trinity, and who is keenly interested in the work here, but now lives in California. You might give some thought as to how you would answer that question. Would you

say that it is going well, or would you say that it is not going so well? Whatever your answer would be, you would be responsible to answer truthfully.

Whatever our answer would be, we can be thankful that it would not approach the discouraging answer which Hanani and his companions gave to his brother Nehemiah. (Read it in verse 3.)

"Great affliction" is a term which indicated that the people were like the wall: broken down. It meant that they were being persecuted, were suffering greatly at the hands of their enemies, and so were sad, discouraged, and completely demoralized.

"Reproach" means that they were being disgraced, put to shame, their characters were being attacked, and wherever possible, destroyed. The situation was very, very bad.

This has often been true of the work of the Lord. The Enemy, who is behind all attacks upon the Lord's work and the Lord's people, is out to do away with both the Lord's people and the Lord's work. Those who oppose the work seem to prosper, and what is the worst of all, it sometimes seems that the Lord does not care, or that He is too busy with other matters.

ONE THING IS CERTAIN: THE LORD'S WORK IS NEVER AS GOOD AS WE WOULD LIKE FOR IT TO BE! We always seek greater blessing. We are always confronted with problems of various kinds. The Devil is always busy, and he always seems to have plenty of help from people who seem to delight in causing trouble. When Paul met with the Ephesian elders at Miletus, he warned them that in the coming days they would have trouble, plenty of it, some coming in from the outside; other arising from within! We need to take note of the good things that are taking place, but it is the bad that often consumes our attention.

But the question is this: When things are not going well, or when things are as bad as they were in Jerusalem back in the fifth century B.C., what should we do? Should we quit? Or should we continue on with a hopeless attitude? Or should we act like everything is going fine? What should we do?

We see the answer in:

II. NEHEMIAH'S RESPONSE (Neh. 1:4-11).

I want you to notice that there is no evidence that Nehemiah gave any advice to his brother and the men who were with him. There is not even any evidence that Nehemiah knew what to do.

We learn from his prayer that he wanted to go to be with the people in Jerusalem, but Nehemiah felt just as helpless as anyone else did. There are times when we do not have any answers, and the only thing that we know to do is to PRAY!

However, notice first:

A. What he did (Neh. 1:4).

Nehemiah mentioned four things that he did.

HIS TERRIBLE
GRIEF

1. He sat down--probably because he felt that all of his strength was suddenly drained away.
2. He wept. Perhaps a part of the reason for his tears was his disappointment.
3. He mourned--and this continued on for several days.
4. He fasted--not because this is what he had planned to do, but because his grief had taken his appetite.
5. He prayed. And notice the title that he used here for God: "the God of heaven." (Notice this title also in Neh. 1:5; 2:4, 20.)

As strange as it may seem, this title for God appeared first of all in these books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the decree issued by Artaxerxes when he sent Ezra to Jerusalem. Cf. Ezra 7:12, 21, 23. As the God of heaven, God is the sovereign God, the God over all men and nations and even the demons! And it is very significant that before Nehemiah went to Artaxerxes, he sought help from "the God of heaven." Although Nehemiah felt helpless, and shared the despair of his people, yet he sought the help of the mighty God of heaven in this great time of need.

But then we have the record of:

B. What he said--NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER (Neh. 1:5-11).

How wonderful it is to have so many prayers in the Bible. They help us to know how to pray. Let me point out the main divisions of Nehemiah's prayer, and that which seems to be indicated by them.

HIS HUMILITY

1. He recognized the One to Whom he was speaking

(Neh. 1:5).

So often when we pray we rush into our requests without taking the time to acknowledge that we are speaking to the Lord God of heaven and earth, the Almighty God, the eternal God. He is God; we are His children, but we are also the work of His hands, His creatures, mere human beings. Let us never forget what a high honor it is, the highest of all honors, that we should be granted an audience with the God of heaven.

When we were in England, do you think I could have been able to have a private visit with the Queen of England, or with the Prince of Wales? I doubt it. But with all due respect to them, I have, and you have, an infinitely greater privilege. We can have an audience, a hearing, with the God of heaven, and He will admit us at our convenience--whenever we want to come.

2. He asked that he might be heard (Neh. 1:6a).

What an honor, an honor of which we are not worthy, to be able to speak with the "Lord God of heaven."

Do you not detect in Nehemiah's words a sense of his own unworthiness as he came to the God in prayer? And note the simplicity of his faith. He knew that he could go to the Lord. And he knew that the Lord would hear him, and see him. And yet he sought these blessings as though they depended upon his asking!

How different this is from some modern day praying in which people go to the Lord as they would go to an equal, and demand from Him what they want. There is often no humility in prayer. Faith does not mean that we try to command God; faith is that attitude of trust where we leave matters in His hands.

The third thing that Nehemiah did was that

3. He confessed his sins and the sins of the people (Neh. 1:6b, 7).

Specifically, what did his confession mean?

It meant that he was telling the Lord that he, his father's house, and the whole nation, deserved everything that they were getting by way of persecution.

When we have troubles, even troubles in the Lord's work, we are inclined to ask the Lord, "Why?" It seldom occurs to us

that the Lord is speaking to us through the troubles that we are having. We have such a faulty view of ourselves and our sins that we are more inclined to blame God than we are to think that the Lord might have some reasons for taking us through hard times.

Nehemiah confessed that they had sinned, that they had sinned against the Lord, and that their main sin was a lack of being obedient to the Word of God. We forget that there are sins of omission as well as sins of commission. That is, we forget that often sin in a greater way by the things that we do not do than we do by the things that we do.

It was through these days of grief and pain that Nehemiah saw the hand of the Lord in the things that were taking place, and he was sincerely grieved by their sins, his sins, and sought forgiveness from the Lord.

The fourth thing he did was this:

HIS FAITH

4. He claimed the promises of God (Neh. 1:8, 9).

He asked the Lord (very graciously) to remember what He had promised to do through Moses. This teaches us that God loves to be reminded of His Word. He loves the prayers in which we show that we know His promises. Nehemiah could not expect the Lord to reward them because of their sin. But He could depend upon God to be faithful to His Word since the Lord made such promises knowing that there would be times, many of them, when His people would fail Him, would disobey Him.

After this:

HIS TENDERNESS

5. He identified the Lord's people (Neh. 1:10).

They did not deserve to be. And by their disobedience they had shown themselves to be most unworthy. And yet they were the people whom the Lord had redeemed. And Nehemiah reminded the Lord that He had redeemed them by His great power and strong hand. They would never have been redeemed if the Lord had not redeemed them. Their sin was no reason that He would cast them away. They had been redeemed by grace, not by works. And so for himself and for the people Nehemiah laid claim to the relationship that they had with the Lord, a relationship which the Lord had established, and which He would maintain.

And after seeking God's forgiveness for their sins,

HIS HOPE

6. Nehemiah made one further request (Neh. 1:11).

He felt in his heart that he should go to Jerusalem to help the people, and so he asked the Lord to give him mercy when he presented his request to King Artaxerxes. It was a big thing to ask, but he prayed expecting that "the God of heaven" was sufficient even for this. God quite evidently had put in Nehemiah's heart the desire to go.

But notice another thing in this last verse. Nehemiah knew that he was not the only one who was praying about the situation in Jerusalem. He knew that others were praying, that there were others who wanted to do God's will. And so he was asking that God would grant their united request.

How often we feel that we are the only ones who are praying about the needs that we see in the Lord's work, when there are always others who are praying. Spurgeon once said that it was at this point that he liked Nehemiah better than Elijah. Elijah felt that he was the only one left; Nehemiah knew that there were others.

Concl: So where does this leave us? We are anxious to read on and to find out what happened. But what does this passage have for us?

Can you see there are needs and there are problems in the Lord's work today? Can you see needs and problems at Trinity? What are you doing about it? Are you criticizing? Or are you withdrawing? Or are you praying? Are you looking to see if perhaps your own lack of obedience to the Lord is partially to blame? Do you have sins to confess? Are there things that the Lord is seeking to teach you?

Remember that there is no limitation as to what God can do. His power is just as great as it ever was.

May our prayer be the prayer that David prayed at the end of Psalm 19--verse 14:

Let the words of my mouth,
and the meditation of my heart,
be acceptable in thy sight,
O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

THE GOOD HAND OF THE GOD OF HEAVEN
Nehemiah 2:1-20

Intro: The events recorded in the life of Nehemiah took place almost 100 years after the first return of the exiles recorded in the early chapters of the book of Ezra. There were approximately 13 years between the return of Ezra and the later return of Nehemiah. Here in the book of Nehemiah we have a period of four months between chapters 1 and 2. (The month Chisleu, corresponding to our November, is mentioned in 1:1; the month Nisan, corresponding to our March or April, is mentioned in 2:1.) This means that Nehemiah had been praying for approximately four months, called "certain days" in 1:4. The prayer that we have in chapter 1 is a sample of the way that he prayed during all of that time.

The explanation, however, as to why Nehemiah did what he did in returning to Jerusalem, he has given to us himself in the words found in 2:12: "...neither told I any man **what God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem....**" Nehemiah did not take any credit for himself, nor did he do what he did to exalt himself. He believed that he was returning to Jerusalem because God had put this in his heart, and he was doing it for the glory of God.

There was no temple until Ezra returned. There was no wall until Nehemiah returned. These two events give us the main theme of each of these books and the chief works for which these two men are remembered in Scripture: the building of the temple, and the rebuilding of the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's primary reason for wanting to rebuild the walls of the city was not for the city's defense. We have his own explanation of this also in 2:17b, "...come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, **that we be no more a reproach.**"

We had that word "reproach" in our text last Sunday. It is in verse 3 of chapter 1. (Read.) I hope you remember that I said that the people were being afflicted, meaning that they, too, were being broken down (like the wall), and that their name, as the people of God, was being disgraced, shamed, ridiculed. And, as is always the case with the people of God (including ourselves), **IF OUR NAME IS DISGRACED, THEN SO IS THE NAME OF OUR GOD BECAUSE HIS NAME IS UPON US!** Following the Aaronic blessing in Num. 6, we have these words in verse 27:

And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them.

For God to have a city in ruins was unthinkable to Nehemiah.

The city should reflect the glory of God, and that is primarily why he was determined, by the grace of God, to rebuild the walls.

Now let us see how Nehemiah went about to get the whole project started.

The first thing in chapter 2 is:

I. NEHEMIAH'S REQUEST (Neh. 2:1-8).

First of all, let us ask ourselves why Nehemiah had the right to expect that this was the will of God.

There were several reasons:

- 1) The prophecy of Jeremiah in Jer. 29:10. Nehemiah knew that two groups of exiles had gone back to Jerusalem in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy.
- 2) God's hand had been clearly seen in the building of the temple under Ezra.
- 3) The exiles had profited from the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah. The restoration of the temple was but the first step leading to the restoration of the city.
- 4) Nehemiah believed that the Lord had put this in his heart. He was determined to move ahead, trusting the Lord to open the way before him.

Therefore, by the Word, by what had already taken place, and by the Lord's dealing with him in his heart, he had plenty of assurance that he should move ahead to rebuild the walls of the city so that the city could be restored to its former glory, and to the glory of God.

After four months of prayer and fasting and tears, one day when the burden was particularly heavy upon Nehemiah's heart, and showing on his face, the King himself asked Nehemiah why he was sad. Cf. vv. 1, 2. Nehemiah answered in verse 3. Then in verse 4 the King asked Nehemiah what he wanted.

This was a most crucial point to Nehemiah. If, because of his request, he would turn the King against such a project, it is not very likely that the King would ever be willing to listen to such a request again. If his request made the King angry, things would immediately get worse for the returned exiles in Jerusalem.

So what did Nehemiah do? He prayed! It was not a long prayer. In fact, it was a very short prayer--the kind of prayer which this book of Nehemiah links with Nehemiah more than anyone else in Scripture. It has been called

ejaculatory prayer! What is ejaculatory prayer?

It is a sudden, brief prayer that you throw out to the Lord. It is the kind of a spontaneous prayer that is offered in a crisis. It is the only kind of praying that many people do. I think that it is interesting to see that in Nehemiah's case it was prayer offered after he had been praying about this same matter for about four months. Ejaculatory prayer is acceptable prayer, but if it is the only kind of praying that we do, we do not know much about what real prayer is.

We are not told what Nehemiah said to the Lord, but simply that he prayed. It is obvious that he wanted the Lord's guidance in what he said, and wanted King Artaxerxes to be favorable toward him.

Nehemiah's request was a big one. What meaning was attached to the Queen being present, we do not know. At least it seems that she was not disapproving of what the King did. However, Nehemiah (at the end of verse 8) did not take the credit to himself for the way in which he presented the need, nor did he give King Artaxerxes the credit, nor did he give it to the Queen, but he said,

And the king granted me,

according to the good hand of my God upon me (v. 8b).

Nehemiah knew that his answer came because THE GOOD HAND OF THE GOD OF HEAVEN was upon him.

What an illustration this is of James 1:17, "Every good gift and every perfect gift...."

II. NEHEMIAH'S JOURNEY (Neh. 2:9-11).

We are not told how long it took. We only know that Nehemiah had the letters which he had requested from the King, that he had a military escort, that there were those who were opposed to his project, and that he remained in Jerusalem for three days before he did anything. The people knew that he was there, but, according to verse 16, he had not yet told them why he had come.

I will say more about Sanballat and Tobiah in just a few minutes--when we get down to verse 19.

III. NEHEMIAH'S SURVEY OF THE CITY (Neh. 2:12-16).

Nehemiah and a few men who were with him made this survey at night to see what the condition of the city actually was. He found that the walls were broken down, and that the gates had been burned with fire. It was just as bad as his brother and the men who were with him, had said.

Nehemiah showed a great deal of wisdom in what he did, not hurrying into action, nor even making his objective known until the time was right. When he did tell them, he knew what he was talking about; he knew what a tremendous task it would be to rebuild the walls.

IV. THE RESPONSE (Neh. 2:17-20).

Nehemiah gave us a twofold response:

- 1) That of the leaders of the Jews.
- 2) That of the three enemies of the Jews: Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem.

Let us notice what they were.

A. The response of the Jewish leaders (vv. 17, 18).

He told them two things, and we will all have to agree that the two things were given in their order of importance.

First he told them about the Lord's dealings with him. The Lord had given him the concern that he had for the exiles in Jerusalem. The Lord had sent his brother and several others to give him a first-hand report of the deplorable conditions in the city. And it was the Lord Who had made the King and Queen receptive to his requests.

Then he told them what the King had said, and what the King had done to make it possible for Nehemiah to be there at that time.

Again let me remind you of Prov. 21:1. I don't want you to forget it, and I don't want to forget it either.

The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord,
as the rivers of water:
he turneth it whithersoever he will.

Charles Bridges, in his book on Proverbs (p. 364), speaks of God's "uncontrollable sway upon the most absolute of all wills --the king's heart." And then he added: "The king's heart he (the Lord) directs as a responsible agent, without interfering with the moral liberty of his will." We see God at work on the heart of Artaxerxes, and yet Artaxerxes acting as though it all came from him.

God is not only a living God, but He is a good God, and He is a great God--greater than all of the combined powers of the rulers of this world. That is why we read what we read in Psa. 2:2-5:

The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying
Let us break their bands asunder,

and cast away their cords from us.
He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh:
the Lord shall have them in derision.
Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath,
and vex them in his sore displeasure.

These are good verses for us to keep in mind in these days when Haddam Husein is causing such trouble for the whole world. He is not as great as he thinks he is. But if he were that great, there is still One Who is infinitely greater than he is.

After the leaders had heard the evidence that Nehemiah presented to them, they were ready to join with him in the task. (Read v. 18b.)

But we have another response to consider:

B. The response of Israel's enemies (vv. 19, 20).

In verse 10 we had two names: Sanballat and Tobiah; here we have three names: Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. This seems to be evidence that Sanballat and Tobiah had been recruiting more help for their side. Who were they--just three men?

No, they were three leaders who had many people behind them.

Sanballat was a leader of the Samaritans. Tobiah was, as our text indicates, an Ammonite. And Geshem was an Arabian, an official of those Arabian tribes who took over Moab and Edom. They were men "of influence and power" (Kidner, p. 81)--political power! And so we are not talking about three disgruntled men who hates the Jews, but three men with political clout who had thousands of people behind them who despised the Jews just like they did.

What was their response?

They laughed them to scorn, which means that they mocked them. They ridiculed them. They treated the whole thing like it was a big joke. They "despised" them, displaying their contempt by trying to make them think that insignificant people like they were could never succeed at such a task. And then they threatened them with the idea that they were plotting a rebellion against Artaxerxes.

This was not a thing which Nehemiah and the leaders of the Jews could ignore. Great opposition stood in their way. If these men had been free to do what they wanted to do, the wall would never have been rebuilt. But how did Nehemiah respond to them?

Look at verse 20. Nehemiah did not hesitate, but spoke out with confidence in God, expressing his strong faith that what the Lord had called upon them to do, and had confirmed in many ways, would without a doubt be fully accomplished.

- Again Nehemiah began with God! The governments of the earth, regardless of who they are and how many they are, are no match for "the God of heaven." With God on their side, they could not fail. Think of this in connection with Psalms 1:3.

The title "servants" here is not just a routine claim. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were speaking with Jews who were committed to do the will of God.

And Nehemiah knew that those three men, and all who would stand with them, would have "no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem." They would have no inheritance, nor righteousness, nor anything that they could pass on to their children. What a solemn decision these men had made when they opposed the work of the Lord! Not only were they closing the door on their own salvation, but the course of their lives would amount to shutting the door for their children as well.

- Concl: As I studied out the meaning of these words I could not help but think of our Lord's words in Mark 8:36, 37:
 For what shall it profit a man,
 if he shall gain the whole world,
 and lose his own soul?
 Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Political power meant more to those men than the work of the Lord. In fact, the work of the Lord was below them. They scorned and despised men who spoke boldly in the name of the Lord. We are going to hear more about these men in the following chapters, but we see enough here to know that their doom is sealed.

(Speak to those who may be putting other things ahead of the Lord, or those who openly scorn the Gospel and the work of the Lord in the world.)

- Let us all remember that where the Lord is at work, the Devil goes to work, too. His opposition at times can be severe. Sometimes it will seem like the Devil is the victor, and that the Lord has suffered a terrible defeat. But we can say what the Apostle Paul said in 2 Cor. 2:14: "Now thanks be to God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ...." Let us not minimize the Devil's work, but neither let us be discouraged. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31b).

Looking back into history to see how others have dealt with this passage, especially in its application to us today, I have found that certain men of God have seen two ways in which this passage is important in any generation:

- 1) The application that it has to the church.
- 2) The application we can all make to our own lives.

Spurgeon, in introducing his message on Nehemiah 2:12 (Vol. 59, p. 349), had this to say:

I like to picture to myself that man of God going by moonlight round all the waste places of the city, compelled here and there to dismount by reason of rubbish; clambering over the fallen stones; leaping sometimes with agility from crag to crag of the city's walls; getting in his mind a clear idea of all the city's desolation, and feeling in his heart the pressing, heavy weight and burden of the responsibility which God had thrust upon him. If he had begun his work carelessly and thoughtlessly, he might have failed in it: but having begun months before with prayer, having been guided by Providence so far, yet even now the very first step he must take, is a personal survey of the work, and a thorough personal acquaintance of himself with the necessities of the case.

And then he announced to his people that his first point would be that this was "a fine example to those who would seek the good of the church at large," and that his second point would be, "a pattern to any of us labouring in any one distinct sphere." And his last point was that, as he said, "I may apply the same principle in reference to the personal work which is being done in our own hearts."

Let me make those suggestions for you and for myself today. Make your own survey of the church, even of our church, of the particular ministry that you have--perhaps here, and/or in your home, in your neighborhood, with your relatives and friends, on your job. And then what is most important of all, your own life! Make your own survey. See what needs to be done to make every aspect of your life more in keeping with what it should be for God's glory, and then, by His grace, begin to make the repairs.

If all of us would do this, it would mark a new day spiritually in our lives and in the life and ministry of Trinity Bible Church. Make God enable us to do today, in these areas, to pray for His guidance and help, and then to do what needs to be done for His glory, and to make our lives more useful in blessing as we touch the lives of others.

WORKING, WAITING, WATCHING
Nehemiah 3,4

Intro: Nehemiah lives in the capital city of the Medo-Persian empire. The events recorded in Nehemiah 1 took place about 13 years after Ezra had gone to Jerusalem. Nehemiah learned from his brother, Hanani, who had just returned from Jerusalem that conditions were bad in that city. This was a grief to Nehemiah, and so he began to pray that he might be able to do something about it. In particular he wanted to rebuild the walls of the city. He prayed for four months after the order of his prayer in chapter 1.

We are told at the end of chapter 1 that Nehemiah was "the king's cupbearer"--the same word that is translated "butler" in the Genesis account of the life of Joseph. See Gen. 40:1 ff.

Chapter 2 tells us that one day at the end of that time he was so sad in the presence of King Artaxerxes that the king asked him what was wrong. Nehemiah told him of his great concern for the city and the people of Jerusalem. As a result, the king granted Nehemiah time off to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. He even arranged from Nehemiah to get the materials that he would need for that great project.

The remainder of chapter 2 tells of Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem, his opposition from three very powerful Gentiles, and the survey that he made of the city before he announced to the people why he was there.

In chapter 3, which we come to today, we see the work getting started. In chapter 4 we are told how intense the opposition became, and what Nehemiah and the people had to do in order for the work to continue.

So we are going to be thinking about the WORK of rebuilding the wall. Then we will see how the people were forced to WAIT upon the Lord for His protection. Finally, we are told of the WATCH that the Jews set up against their enemies. It seems to me that these are the main subject in these two chapters. That is why I have given my message the subject, WORKING, WAITING, WATCHING.

First of all, then,

I. THE WORK (Neh. 3:1-32).

Actually the work continues right on into chapter 6 where in verse 15 we are told that it was finished. But there is a

special emphasis here in chapter 3 as we are told who was doing the work, and what in particular each one did.

One outstanding thing about the wording of chapter 3 is that thirty-five times the word "repaired" is used throughout the chapter! The word does not necessarily mean that they put everything back the way it was before, like a restoration. It can mean that. But the main idea is that they made the wall and the gates firm and strong! This shows that Tobiah did not know what he was talking about when he said, as it is recorded in 4:3b,

Even that which they build, if a fox go up,
he shall even breakdown their stone wall.

The work which they did was a masterpiece. We do not have any reason to think that any of the builders was experienced in this kind of building, yet their work was superb! There was only one problem, and that is mentioned in verse 5. The nobles of the Tekoites "put not their necks to the work of their Lord." It means that they refused to subject themselves to the Lord and to His work. The words picture for us putting the neck under a yoke, utter submission to the Lord. We are not given the reason for their rebellion, but it is sad to see that they were not cooperative. Even in times of great blessing, such as this was, there are regrettable things like this that take place.

The lesson for us from chapter 3 is obvious. We need to do the work of the Lord the best way that we can. The Lord is worthy of far more than the best that we can give Him, but we need to excel for His glory. The kind of work which the Jews did in rebuilding the wall was certain to bring great glory to their God. What a privilege it is to be able to serve the Lord in any way!

But let us go on to chapter 4.

The first six verses tell us about:

II. THE MOCKERY OF SANBALLAT AND TOBIAH (Neh. 4:1-6).

The questions that Sanballat asked were all designed to break the spirit of the Jews.

"What do these feeble Jews?" means that they did not have the strength nor the know-how for such a task.

"Will they fortify themselves?" This means, Do they think that they can do this work alone?

"Will they sacrifice?"—i.e., Will they call upon God to do

some special, miraculous work for them?

"Will they make an end in a day?" Are they so stupid as to think this is a very easy task, and that they can finish it in no time at all?

"Will they revive the stones....?" This was to make them think that they did not have the material available to do such a work.

And then Tobiah added his slanderous rebuke which is found in verse 3.

Slander, mockery, demeaning questions are frequently the tools which Satan uses. And they hurt. With some, they are very effective. I am reminded of what Rabshakeh did during Hezekiah's reign when he sought to show the Jews how foolish it was to trust the Lord. Cf. Isa. 36.

What do we do when such things happen? What did Hezekiah do? What did Nehemiah do? Did they try to answer their enemies? No! THEY PRAYED! That was the first thing that they did.

See Nehemiah's prayer in verses 4 and 5.

He called upon God as "our God." He cast the burden of the people upon their God. He asked the Lord to be their helper and their defense, defeating their enemies. And at the end he indicates that the attack of Sanballat and Tobiah was not primarily an attack upon them, but upon God Himself!

The prayer was not long, but it was very much to the point. This was the first thing that they did.

The second thing that they did was to go on working. We must never let criticism and slander cause us to stop serving the Lord. The Lord had given Nehemiah a job, and Nehemiah was deeply convinced of that. So, regardless of who the enemies might be, the work of the Lord must go ahead--and this is what they did. And the explanation given here is: "...for the people had a mind to work."

Whenever this is the case with the Lord's people, blessing is sure to come. They were not going to be discouraged. They believed that the Lord had led them to do what they were doing. They believed that He would see them through, that no amount of opposition could really stop the work of the Lord. They were determined to do the work, and to finish it as soon as they possibly could.

This is an excellent illustration of 1 Cor. 15:58,

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast...."

But in verses 7 through 15 we see:

III. THE ENEMIES PLAN TO ATTACK THE JEWS (Neh. 4:7-15).

At this point the forces of Sanballat and Tobiah were not satisfied to use only words; they planned to attack the Jews to put the Lord's work at an end.

Verse 9 tells us that the Jews were on their guard. They did not expect their enemy to be satisfied with mere words. This is the first mention in the book of a WATCH. The end of the chapter deals with that more in detail, but we see that the Jews did two things:

- 1) They continued to pray to "our God."
- 2) They set a watch day and night.

Do you remember Peter's words in 1 Pet. 5:8?

Be sober, be vigilant,
because your adversary the devil,
as a roaring lion, walketh about,
seeking whom he may devour.

James said, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (Jas. 4:7b). We are not to run away from our enemy, nor are we to minimize his power to hurt us. But we are to be faithful in prayer, continuing working, but set up our watch, anticipating his next moves, but trusting God to help us and to show us what to do.

But now look at what was happening.

First, the people of Judah were discouraged. The questions of Sanballat had gotten to them. They were weary in the work, and felt that their strength was gone. They felt that the task really was too big for them, and that they would not be able to finish the task.

Discouragement is a difficult problem to handle. Perhaps that is a problem that some of you have. The problems seem to be too great, and the work something that we are not able to do—at least it is not getting done.

In addition to this, the enemy was planning a surprise attack. See verse 11 and 12. The report had come to Nehemiah ten times so there was little doubt but what it was true.

What did Nehemiah do at this point?

- 1) He made sure that his people were armed and in their positions. Cf. v. 13.

- 2) He spoke words of encouragement to them. Cf. v. 14.
- 3) He recognized that they had learned what their enemy had planned because God was frustrating the attempts of their enemy to do what they had planned to do.

~ These have real practical significance for us in the work that the Lord has given us to do.

But now let us look at the last eight verses of the chapter. Here we have:

IV. THE ORGANIZED WATCH (Neh. 4:16-23).

There were four parts to the plan:

- A. Half of the people worked; half stood guard. (A habergeon is an armor, especially made to defend the neck and chest. See v. 16.
- B. Those who worked were also armed. See vv. 17, 18.
- C. A plan was devised to notify and rally the people if any part of the wall were attacked. See vv. 19, 20.
- D. The city was defended by night as well as by day. The men did not even take off their clothes at night--just when they bathed. And Nehemiah did this along with the rest of his men. See vv. 21-23.

~ But it is important to see that with all that Nehemiah did, his confidence for victory was in his God. Note his words in verse 20b: "Our God shall fight for us."

Nehemiah probably knew those important words in Psa. 127:1,
Except the Lord build the house,
they labour in vain that build it:
except the Lord keep the city,
the watchman waketh but in vain.

But we also should note that his faith in the Lord did not keep him from arming himself and his people. It is not inconsistent with our faith to take necessary precautions in facing danger.

~ The same is true where the Lord's work is concerned. We do not go blindly on, ignoring the difficulties and making light of the problems. We deal with them, but we do it trusting the Lord to bless and use what we do. Otherwise our works are worthless.

Concl: Let me summarize for you some of the lessons of these

two chapters as we seek to make some applications to the work that the Lord has called us to do.

- 1) The Lord has given us work to do. It is not the same kind of work that Nehemiah did, but it is His work. We are under a divine commission just as much as Nehemiah was.
- 2) As we have seen before, there are going to be problems in the work of the Lord. Some come from the outside; some arise from within. Let us expect problems, and be prepared to deal with them.
- 3) The work of the Lord cannot be accomplished without prayer, much prayer--extended periods of prayer, and short, ejaculatory prayers. Our work without the Lord's help is worthless.
- 4) We all need to be armed and to be on our guard day and night. Cf. Eph. 6:10-20.
- 5) We need to have faith in God, knowing that while we are inadequate for the work He is called us to do, He is sufficient!
- 6) Regardless of the nature of the opposition, discouragement from within, or attacks from without, we need to keep working, to keep praying, to keep trusting God to fulfill His own good purposes in us and through us. Remember:
And let us not be weary in well doing:
for in due season we shall reap,
if we faint not (Gal. 6:9).

WALKING IN THE FEAR OF GOD
Nehemiah 5

Intro: In chapter 5 we have an entirely different kind of a problem from that which we considered in chapter 4. In chapter 4 the problem came upon the people from the outside. It had to do with three men who are mentioned the first time in chapter 2. They were Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. These men were high officials in the countries surrounding Judah, and they were determined to stop the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Their actions are described in chapter 4.

In chapter 5 we see that there was trouble within the nation. It had to do with the way in which the people were handling the difficult circumstances that the nation was in at the time.

I. THE TROUBLES OF THE JEWS IN JERUSALEM (Neh. 5:1-5).

Notice in verse 1 the words, "a great cry." The people were in great distress because of the way in which they were being treated by their leaders. They were crying out in their complaint, and they refused to be silenced. Their troubles were "great" because they saw no way out of their dilemma.

It was a situation similar to that which the Israelites faced in the land of Egypt before they were delivered by Moses. Cf. Ex. 2:23-25. Nehemiah does not tell us that the people were crying out to God. He simply says that they were crying out! (Read Ex. 2:23-25.)

This is often the case with us. We are in distress for some reason or other, and we cry out in our misery, but we do not cry out to God! God's word to His people in Jeremiah's day was,

Call unto me, and I will answer thee,
and shew thee great and mighty things,
which thou knowest not (Jer. 33:3).

How important it is for us to cry out TO GOD when we are in trouble for any reason!

What were their troubles?

Verses 2 and 3 tell us that there was a famine in the land, and the people were in great distress because they did not have enough money and food to feed their families.

The people had mortgaged their lands and possessions in order to get food.

They had also been forced to borrow money to pay their taxes: "the king's tribute."

And what was most difficult of all, their children had become slaves in order for the people to get the money that they needed in order to exist at all.

IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT THIS CHAPTER HAS LITTLE TO SAY ABOUT THE REBUILDING OF THE WALLS. THAT PROJECT, AS IMPORTANT AS IT WAS, WAS INSIGNIFICANT IF THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE AND THEIR CHILDREN WERE THREATENED BECAUSE OF THE UNBEARABLE SITUATION WHICH THEY FACED.

II. NEHEMIAH'S ACTION AND THE RESPONSE OF THE LEADERS (Neh. 5:6-19).

In verse 14 we see that Nehemiah had been "appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah." He had received this appointment from King Artaxerxes, and he was responsible to the king for the administration of justice in the land of Judah.

However, it is important to note several things about what Nehemiah did.

Nehemiah was very angry when he discovered what was going on between the leaders of the people and the people because they were violating the Word of God to the nation through Moses. Cf. Deut. 23:19, 20. (Read.) ALTHOUGH HE WAS RESPONSIBLE TO KING ARTAXERXES, NEHEMIAH KNEW THAT THE ONLY WAY HE COULD HAVE THE BLESSING OF GOD UPON HIS WORK WAS TO SEE TO IT THAT HE AND THE PEOPLE WERE DOING WHAT THE LORD WANTED THEM TO DO. We cannot be disobedient to the Word if we are seeking the blessing of the Lord. Truly this was a situation which only the Lord could relieve!

But now let us look at the things which Nehemiah did, as the governor of the people.

A. He got very angry, but took time to cool off before he did anything (vv. 6, 7a).

Nehemiah was of a completely different disposition from Ezra. You will remember that, when Ezra learned about the intermarriage of the people of God with the heathen, he tore his clothes, pulled the hair out of his head, and went into astonishment and grief because of the sin of the people.

We have seen already that Nehemiah was a man of prayer, but his response was different from Ezra's response. Nehemiah was angry! But he did something which he had obviously

learned before that he needed to do in situations like this: He "consulted" with himself! Interestingly the verb "consulted" is the Hebrew verb, to reign. Apparently Nehemiah knew that he had to get himself under control before he did anything about the troubles that his people were in.

I find it interesting also that Solomon had written earlier the words which we find in Prov. 25:28,

He that hath no rule over his own spirit
is like a city that is broken down,
and without walls.

Solomon also had said (Prov. 16:32),

He that is slow to anger
is better than the mighty;
and he that ruleth his spirit
than he that taketh a city.

We can be sure that Nehemiah was well acquainted with the Proverbs of Solomon, and that he had before this time dealt with his tendency to get mad and "fly off the handle," as we would say.

We are all different. We all need help. How important it is for us to deal with our problems in the Lord's way so that we are not hindered in our usefulness.

After he got himself under control, we see the second thing that he did:

B. He rebuked the nobles and rulers who were under him (vv. 7b-11).

Nehemiah charged them with wrongdoing because they were charging the people interest. Why was this wrong? It was wrong because it was forbidden by the Word of God.

I believe that our country today is under the judgment of God because of things which we not only tolerate, but have legalized in our country. I speak of abortion, and I speak of homosexuality. Why are these things wrong, terribly wrong? They are wrong, they are sinful, because God says that they are! AND NO NATION CAN SURVIVE WHICH PERSISTENTLY SINS AGAINST GOD!

THE KEY TO WHAT NEHEMIAH TOLD THE LEADERS IS IN VERSE 9. Since they were the people of God they needed to be concerned about the glory of God. And they were in danger of bringing reproach upon the Lord's Name by their violation of the Word of God.

Application: With us it might not be as great an issue as those I have mentioned that we are facing in our country, but

seeing this in the Word of God should make us ask ourselves, Am I hindering the blessing of the Lord by my own disobedience to God in some area of my life? Am I walking in the fear of the Lord?

- ~ There is a very important word in Acts 9 about conditions in the early churches which resulted in the blessing of God. I want to read it to you, and then ask that we all think about it. It is Acts 9:31 and has to do with the situation in the churches after the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Listen to what Luke wrote:

Then had the churches rest
throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria,
and were edified;
and walking in the fear of the Lord,
and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit,
were multiplied.

What does it mean to walk in the fear of the Lord?

You have seen from the verses that I have used just now that this is an OT expression, and that it is also a NT expression. Therefore it is very important for us to understand what it means.

- ~ We can see from our text that to walk in the fear of the Lord means to live in obedience to the Word of God, AND, ALONG WITH THAT, TO BE FEARFUL OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISOBEYING GOD.

To fear the Lord is to hold the Lord in the highest degree of awe and reverence, to recognize that He is God and we are His creatures, He is our heavenly Father and we are His children. The person who fears the Lord wants to please the Lord, and he realizes that nothing will work out right if he is not pleasing the Lord.

This is a subject of tremendous importance and far-reaching significance. Perhaps some day I will give you a series on the fear of the Lord. But the little poem which we often sing tells what the fear of the Lord is as simply and clearly as it can be told. "In the sweet fear of Jesus...."

If the leaders truly wanted to please the Lord in this situation, what would they do? See verses 10 and 11.

- ~ They must not only quit doing what they had done, but give back to the people that which they had taken from them.

How did the leaders respond?

See verse 12a.

C. The response of the leaders (vv. 12, 13).

- To make it more certain Nehemiah took an oath from them that they would really do what they had promised to do. Then Nehemiah followed this with the symbolic shaking of the lap.

And then a very significant thing happened. It is mentioned in verse 13b. Even before the restoration was made, the people, leaders and people, were shouting, "Amen," and then gave praise to the Lord. If our joy is at a low ebb, or gone altogether, it may be that we need to look for disobedience in our lives.

But this is not all that Nehemiah did.

D. Nehemiah surrenders his rights (vv. 14-18).

There is much in this passage that we in the United States need today. On every hand we hear people demanding their rights. In fact, this has gotten to be such a problem that we are really in danger of anarchy in our country.

Notice what Nehemiah did.

- As the governor, he had the right to tax the people for his own support. It was absolutely legal, and it was a thing expected by the people.

However, the controlling principle in Nehemiah's life was not what he had the right to do, but how could he best please the Lord. His people were hungry. Some were probably starving. Some had been enslaved. He had called upon those who were leaders under him to return what they had taken away. He indicated here that he was not going to take what was legally his. Not only did he refuse to raise his own salary; he did not take a part of that which legally his right.

And why?

See the end of verse 15. And then see the end of verse 18.

- I think that it was Matthew Henry who said that in Nehemiah's action on this point we see evidence of his obedience to what our Lord said were the two great commandments in the Law: Nehemiah was showing (1) his love for God, and (2) his love for the people of God. If even we as the Lord's people were more concerned about how we can please God, and how we can help people, especially His people, the joy would be much greater in our lives, and we would see greater and greater

blessing from God.

And now we come to the final point, and final verse, in the chapter. And it is easy to identify verse 19 as:

— E. Nehemiah's prayer (v. 19).

Did Nehemiah feel that the Lord was now indebted to him. Did God owe him blessing?

No, not in the sense in which we usually think of someone owing us anything. Nehemiah was doing something here that delights the heart of God. He was claiming the fulfillment of the promises of God. He had done what he had done because he wanted to please the Lord. He had in a sense "sacrificed" what was rightfully his own. He was here calling upon God to meet his needs, and to add His blessing to the work that the Lord had called Nehemiah to do. This is a prayer of faith. Nehemiah had not given up what he had because he did not need it; he had needs. But he was trusting the Lord to meet those needs so that nothing might hinder the work that the Lord had called him to do.

Cf. 1 John 3:22.

— Concl: I told the men at our prayer meeting yesterday morning that I am very interested in verses or passages that speak of fruitfulness and blessing. We certainly have such a passage before us today. Nehemiah was calling upon those who were leaders with him to get things straightened out in their own lives. He showed a willingness on his own part to relinquish rights which he had in order to help the people, and because he wanted to please the Lord.

Are things as they should be in our lives? Do we fear the Lord? Are we more concerned about pleasing Him than we are anything else? Would we rather help others than to help ourselves? Have you taken that survey that I spoke to you about a couple of weeks ago?

When Paul prayed for the Colossian church, this was the first part of his prayer:

...that ye might be filled
with the knowledge of his will
in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;
That ye might walk worthy of the Lord
unto all pleasing,
being fruitful in every good work....
(Col. 1:9b, 10a).

— Blessing always comes when our first priority is to please the Lord in all that we are and in all that we do.

THE TASK COMPLETED

Nehemiah 6:1-19

Intro: There are a number of finished works recorded for us in the Word of God:

- 1) Genesis 2:1 tells us about the finished work of creation when "the heavens and the earth were finished."
- 2) Genesis 6:22 tells us about Noah's work on the ark being finished. It is stated like this: "Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he."
- 3) Exodus tells us about the completion of the work on the Tabernacle. We read in Exodus 40:32,
 Thus was all of the work of the tabernacle
 of the tent of the congregation finished:
 and the children of Israel did
 according to all that the Lord commanded Moses,
 so did they.
- 4) The record of the completion of the work on the temple which Solomon built is given in 1 Kings 6:38:
 And in the eleventh month, in the month Bul,
 which is the eighth month, was the house finished
 throughout all the parts thereof,
 and according to all the fashion of it.
 So he was seven years in building it.
- 5) In the book of Ezra we considered the completion of the temple under Ezra's leadership:
 And this house was finished
 on the third day of the month Adar,
 which was in the sixth year
 of the reign of Darius the king (Ezra 5:15).

Going into the NT we have our Lord's finished works:

- 6) In John 17:4 the Lord said,
 I have glorified thee on the earth:
 I have finished the work
 which thou gavest me to do.
- 7) And then in John 19:30 we have those majestic and triumphant words of our Lord: "It is finished." He was speaking of His redemptive work.
- 8) Philippians 1:6 tells about Christ's finished work in the believer:
 Being confident of this very thing,
 that he which hath begun a good work in you
 will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.
- 9) Finally, in Rev. 21:1 we see the culmination of the purposes of God in the establishing of the new heaven and the new earth.

There are undoubtedly other finished works that could be added to these, for example, the finished work of our Lord's miracles which He performed while here on earth. And we must not forget the finished work of judgment when the wicked are

cast forever into the lake of fire. It is clear in Scripture that what God starts, He finishes--whether it be for people, or through people, or in people, or to people!

Today as we consider the sixth chapter of Nehemiah we will be looking at still another finished work of Scripture: THE REBUILDING OF THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM.

Charles Simeon pointed out in his sermon on this chapter that the success of this project was very unlikely for three reasons (Vol. 4, p. 284):

- 1) The extremely dilapidated and ruined state of the wall when Nehemiah went to Jerusalem.
 - 2) The weakness and poverty of the people who undertook the project.
 - 3) The numbers and power and persistence of their enemies.
- Any one of these problems made the work appear impossible, but all three seemed to say that it would never be done. And yet it was done, and completed in the unbelievable time of 52 days! As Simeon said, it would have been amazing if it had been completed 52 weeks! This is truly a marvelous testimony to the blessing of the Lord and the diligence of the people.

Let us note, first of all,

I. THE PERSISTENCE AND TACTICS OF THE ENEMY (Neh. 6:1-14).

A. The first four attempts (Neh. 6:1-4).

Again Nehemiah was faced with his three treacherous enemies, and those who were with them. The work on the wall was completed except for hanging the doors at the gates. If his enemies could stop the work at this point, they would have been able to undo everything that had been done.

Their purpose is stated at the end of verse 2. It was their intent to get Nehemiah away from his work, and away from his people, so that they could kill him. And they sent the same message to him four times.

Let me wait before I consider with you Nehemiah's response to his enemies.

B. The fifth attempt: a letter (Neh. 6:5-9a).

Here they were using fear as a tactic. They tried to make Nehemiah think that the report was out on him that he was a traitor to King Artaxerxes, that he was building the wall so that he could make himself a king. And they added that he had appointed some prophets to declare that he was the king.

If this were true, that is, that such a report were out, it could have been as damaging to Nehemiah and his people as if it were actually the case.

Although the letter was sent to Nehemiah, it was "an open letter" (v. 5) because Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem knew that it would eventually reach the people to discourage them in their work so that they would stop working.

But there was yet to be one more attempt.

C. Shemaiah's trick (Neh. 6:10-13).

After the failure of the first five attempts, a sixth and last one was used. This time it seemed to bring the Lord into it, making it appear that Nehemiah should go to the Temple for divine protection.

Perhaps Nehemiah remembered the story of the man of God who healed Jeroboam, and Jeroboam wanted to reward him. (The story is found in 1 Kings 13.) The man of God refused because the word of the Lord had come to him saying that he was not to eat bread nor drink water, but to come back to Judah the same way he came. And so he left to return to Judah. But an old prophet in Bethel heard about it, and he went after the man of God, convinced him that an angel had told him to return for bread and water. So the man of God went back, ate bread and drank water, but, because he had disobeyed the Lord, he was killed by a lion when he eventually left to return to Judah.

We need to be careful about getting our guidance from someone else. If the Lord had wanted Nehemiah to go to the Temple, the Lord would have told him. Nehemiah perceived that this was a part of the plot to kill him. And so he refused to go. Note in verse 13 that Nehemiah revealed that this could result in a evil report for him, i.e., his failure to trust the Lord, and this would be SIN!

Now let us consider:

II. NEHEMIAH'S RESPONSE (Neh. 6:3, 4, 8, 9, 11-14).

The first thing that we note is:

A. Nehemiah's refusal to stop working (Neh. 6:3, 4).

Nehemiah knew that the Lord had called him to do this work. He also knew that it was urgent that the work be completed as soon as possible. Therefore, he refused to stop working if it meant leaving his work for any reason! Even if the idea

of his enemies had been legitimate, nothing was more important than for Nehemiah to finish what God had called him to do first. That must have priority over everything else.

This is an important lesson for us. We need to get our priorities straight. We get ourselves into trouble, and we hinder the work of the Lord and lose out on blessed, because we do not put first things first. Our usefulness is often adversely affected because we do not stay on the job!

But there is a second thing to say about Nehemiah:

B. His knowledge of the enemies' tactics (Neh. 6:2b, 8, 9).

He knew that they wanted to kill him. He knew that they were man whose word you could not depend on. They would lie if that would help them accomplish their purpose. He knew that they would use fear. But he also knew that he had a God Who was sufficient to protect him and to see that he would be able to complete his work.

But he did something else.

C. Nehemiah's prayers (Neh. 6:9b, 14).

And so we have another of Nehemiah's ejaculatory prayers! See v. 9b.

Fear is one of the greatest instruments that the Devil uses against us. I was not a great admirer of President Franklin Roosevelt, but he did say one thing during World War II that is worth remembering. He said, "We have nothing to fear but fear." We as the Lord's people know that "God hath not given us the spirit of fear" (2 Tim. 1:7). When we fear, we are not trusting, and when we trust we will not be afraid. Isaiah was speaking of the day of the Lord when he said, "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid" (Isa. 12:2). If we can't say that, we should be able to say as David said, "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee" (Psa. 56:3). Or, "In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me" (Psa. 56:11).

Nehemiah's prayer was an expression of his faith: "Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands." Nehemiah was just as prone to fear as you and I are. But he believed that God could and would take care of him. And so he refused to listen to his enemies, kept working, and kept trusting the Lord as he prayed.

And after the sixth attempt, which was also designed to make

Nehemiah afraid, we have his second prayer in this chapter. Look at it in verse 14.

In the last verse of chapter 5 we see that Nehemiah prayed, "Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people." But he did not tell the Lord how nor when nor with what he should be rewarded. Here in 6:14 he prayed, "My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat ..." But he did not tell the Lord how nor when nor in what way He should deal with them. He simply committed his enemies into the Lord's hands, and left it up to the Lord as to what should be done with them. Matthew Henry wrote about this:

Whatever injuries are done us we must not avenge ourselves, but commit our cause to him that judgeth righteously (II, 1088).

Our Lord is our great Example in this kind of behavior:

Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again;
when he suffered, he threatened not;
but committed himself to him
that judgeth righteously (1 Pet. 2:23).

How much better the Israelites would have been, and what rest of heart they would have enjoyed if they had believed what Moses told them at the Red Sea:

The Lord shall fight for you,
and ye shall hold your peace.

So in Nehemiah we see a man who was determined to get the job done, and yet a man of faith, who was continually crying out to God for His blessing.

Now let us look at:

III. THE OUTCOME (Neh. 6:15-19).

- A. The wall was finished--in record time (Neh. 6:15).
- B. The work was a testimony to the blessing of God (Neh. 6:16).

The Lord always designs His work in this way, and with this purpose in mind. It was not done for Nehemiah's glory. It was not done for the people's glory. It was done for the glory of God, and notice how the record is given:

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.

Going back to the children of Israel after they had safely crossed the Red Sea, and then had seen how destroyed the army of the Egyptians, these were Moses' words:

And Israel saw that great work
which the Lord did upon the Egyptians:
and the people feared the Lord,
and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses
(Ex. 14:31).

But there is one final word in this chapter:

C. The evidence of treason (Neh. 6:17-19).

How subtle the Devil is! When he can't accomplish his purposes by opposition, he enlists the help of the people within. And the friendship with the enemy was established with the nobles in Judah. Many people were attracted to Tobiah because he and his son had married women in Israel. And so they told Nehemiah all of the good things that they could about Tobiah, and reported his words to Tobiah.

We need to be continually on the lookout for trouble from the outside, but we also need to be aware that it can develop from within, from among us.

Even with the work of rebuilding the walls completed, the threat to the peace and blessing of Jerusalem was not over. And so let us not relax our vigilance, nor let anything keep us from continuing with our work, from praying, nor from trusting the Lord. The battles may be won, but the war will not be over until we get to heaven.

Concl: Again we have a chapter that is full of lessons for us in the work of the Lord today. Let us learn them well, and remember them, following the example of Nehemiah, a man of God, who was not only familiar with the ways of the Lord, but also knew the ways of the enemy.

THE CITY, THE PEOPLE, AND THE BOOK
Nehemiah 7, 8

Intro: In the book of Ezra we learned about the rebuilding of the temple. In the book of Nehemiah we have just learned about the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The first is recorded in Ezra 6; the second, in Nehemiah 6. Both were only possible because of the blessing of the Lord, but in each case the Lord used heathen leaders to make the hopes of His people a reality. Cyrus ordered the rebuilding of the temple; Artaxerxes order^{ed} the rebuilding of the walls. Both works were opposed by the enemies of the Lord's people, but both succeeded because the good hand of the God of Israel was upon them.

When we get to Nehemiah 7, both of these works have been completed, but there is a need to strengthen and consolidate the city and its people. This rather lengthy section which I hope to deal with today actually has only three parts. These should be very apparent to you if you were reading this section over for the first time. I have suggested the outline in my title: THE CITY, THE PEOPLE, AND THE BOOK.

THE CITY is the main emphasis in Neh. 7:1-4. THE PEOPLE are before us in Neh. 7:5-73. In Neh. 8:1-18 we will be thinking about THE BOOK, the book of the Law, or as we would say today, the Word of God!

Let us turn now to:

I. THE CITY (Neh. 7:1-4).

I believe it was Matthew Henry who suggested at this point that the people had knowⁿ that "except the Lord build the house," or the walls, "they labour in vain that build it." At this point in their history they knew that "except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain" (Psa. 127:1).

The city had the security provided for it by the walls, but verse 4 tells us that there was still much work to be done within the walls because "the houses were not builded." It seems clear that Nehemiah was thinking about the protection of the city which went beyond the walls themselves. He was thinking about having the blessing of God upon the city, and keeping it! The city was large, but the people were few in number. And so what did he do?

He did three things.

A. He had appointed the people who were required for the

temple worship (Neh. 7:1).

- B. He put two faithful, God-fearing men in charge of the city (Neh. 7:2).
- C. He commanded that the city gates not be opened until late in the morning, that they be closed early, and that guards be posted at all times (Neh. 8:3).

As you think of the three things that Nehemiah did, can you see what was in his mind? Each one had to do with securing the blessing of the Lord. He wanted the temple worship to be carried on right from the beginning. He appointed Hanani and Hananiah to be the rulers of the people because they were godly men, and would lead the people to do what was pleasing to the Lord. We cannot say for sure, but it seems that the reason the gates were opened late, and closed early, was because Nehemiah wanted the people to take care of the continual burnt offering which the Lord had required of them every morning and every night.

Therefore, it is clear that Nehemiah was paying close attention to the things that would bring the blessing of the Lord, and cause the blessing of the Lord to continue upon them. The Lord had to be first. The leaders of the people must, in Nehemiah's thinking, be men of God, men who would lead the people in the ways of the Lord. And nothing must be allowed to take the place of their time with the Lord each morning and each night.

How wonderful it would be if we had some political leaders like Nehemiah and Hanani and Hananiah today! But we can make the application to our own lives, to our families, and to our church. IF WE WANT THE BLESSING OF GOD, THEN WE NEED TO BE CONCERNED FIRST OF ALL ABOUT PLEASING THE LORD. WHETHER WE ARE TALKING ABOUT OLD TESTAMENT TIMES, OR NEW TESTAMENT TIMES, OBEDIENCE TO GOD IS ALWAYS A CONDITION OF BLESSING! Let us make sure that we understand the meaning of those first four verses of Nehemiah 7.

Let us go on to consider:

II. THE PEOPLE (Neh. 7:5-73).

You can see that this is a section made up of the names of the people of God who had returned from exile. It is important to note that this list of names is practically identical to the one in Ezra 2.

It is not necessary for us to spend a great deal of time on these verses, but they are important and we need to

understand why they are here. Let me mention two reasons.

- A. Nehemiah was anxious to identify those who were the true people of God. See verse 5.

He had found "a register of the genealogy" by which the Lord's people could be positively identified.

We have already learned from the book of Ezra and the problem the people had with intermarriages that God wanted His people to remain a pure people, separated from the Gentiles who were all around them. This, too, was a condition of blessing in those days. It is also a condition of blessing for us as the Lord's people today. We can so easily set aside the Word of God when it comes to practical matters, and begin to do things the way the people of the world do them. The lack of separation from the world that characterizes so many of us as the Lord's people is one of the greatest reasons that we are not seeing the blessing of the Lord. We do what the people of the world do. We go where they go. Drinking has become more accepted among the people of God. Television in our homes has broken down many standards which Christians used to observe. There is not only a moral breakdown in our country and in our cities, but there is a moral breakdown in our churches and often in the homes of the people of God. Nehemiah was seeking to protect the Lord's people from that.

Do we know how to be assured that we belong to the Lord? Do we know how to identify people who know and love the Lord? Have we become so gullible that we think that every person who goes to church is a Christian? If you will look at verses 63 and 64 of this seventh chapter, you will see that there were certain people who claimed to be priests, but they could not produce their genealogy. What happened? They were put out of the priesthood. Are you sure that your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life? This is a matter of the greatest importance!

But let me point out one more thing before we go on into chapter 8. This point is also found in Neh. 7:5, and it would be easy to overlook it.

- B. Nehemiah wanted to identify those who had come back at to Jerusalem at the first (Neh. 7:5).

Why would he be concerned about this?

It was because he wanted the people to do, not some new thing, but to do what God had commanded His people to do in the Law that had been revealed through Moses. There are always those who believe that change is the main thing.

There is always room for change if you mean to improve upon what we have been doing, but if you mean changing from what we are told to do in the Word, THAT KIND OF A CHANGE IS NEVER PERMISSIBLE IN THE WORK OF THE LORD!

When the Lord was telling His people through the prophet Isaiah what they needed to do if they were to experience the blessing of God, this is what He said:

And they that shall be of thee
shall build the old waste places:
thou shalt raise up the foundations
of many generations; and thou shalt be called,
The repairer of the breach,
The restorer of paths to dwell in (Isa. 58:12).

Do you suppose that there were people then who wanted to ordain women into the Levitical priesthood? Or what do you think would have been Nehemiah's response to putting homosexuals, men or women, in the ministry? We know what his reaction and Ezra's reaction were to mixing the worship of the true God with the worship of heathen gods.

Let me ask you some questions. Do you believe that the Word of God which we have had now in its completed form for 2,000 years is just as reliable today as it was then? Or do you think that it needs some revision here and there to bring it up to date? Does the NT describe the twentieth century church as well as a first century church? What should people be looking for when they look for a church--an entertainment center, or a counselling center? Or should they be looking for a church where the Word of God is taught and where people come together to worship God and to have fellowship in Christ? How would you answer these questions?

Nehemiah was not looking for innovators; he was looking for repairers and restorers. He did not want people who would lead others away from the Word of God, but he wanted people who would lead the nation back to the Word of God.

Modern humanistic psychology has left such a mark upon the Lord's work today that I wonder if it will ever be removed unto the Lord comes. Why do we pick up the world's terminology, and leave the language of Scripture? Illus: I was asked to fill out a reference blank for one of our young men who is interested in a certain Christian school. One of the questions was this: Does he have a good self image? How would we have answered that for the Apostle Paul? No, he does not have a good self image. He says that he is the worst of sinners. How would you answer that question for David? No, he does not have a good self image. He says that he is a worm, and not a man. Should you and I have a good

self image? The Bible says that the Lord has deliberately chosen those of us who are nothing! That does not give us much of a self image. Let us not be deceived by people within the professing church who have gotten so worldly wise that they no longer find the language of the Bible suitable. I have told you before I like the slogan of that church in Dallas, Texas which claims to preach "the Bible as it is for men as they are." I hope that is our slogan, too.

But let me go on to chapter 8. Here the emphasis is upon:

III. THE BOOK (Neh. 8:1-18).

What Book are we talking about? Cf. vv. 1, 3, 5, 8, 18. "The book of the law of Moses" is the title given to the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. However, the emphasis here is probably upon the books which were written by Moses: Exodus through Deuteronomy.

As this chapter begins, we meet Ezra again. But the important action came from the people. See verse 1. They asked him "to bring the book of the law of Moses."

What did he do with it?

He read from it. How long? "From the morning until midday." See v. 3. To whom did he read it? See vv. 2, 3. Where did he read it? See v. 4. What happened when he opened the book? See vv. 5, 6. And what did he and others do after they had read it? See vv. 7, 8.

What was the reaction of the people to the reading of the law? They wept (v. 9), but they also rejoiced (v. 12). It was a day of great joy (v. 10b), a day of eating and drinking, and of sending food to those who had none (vv. 10-12).

What happened on the second day? See v. 13. The people came to hear the Word, and to gain more understanding.

What did they learn from the reading? They learned about the Feast of Tabernacles. See v. 14. So what did they do? They observed this feast in a city where not all of them had homes. What happened every day of the week that they observed the Feast of Tabernacles? See v. 18. "Day by day," every day, "the book of the law of God" was read to them by Ezra.

You talk about a revival, this was a true revival--a revival caused by the hearing of the Word of God. And it all started because the people requested it. What a wonderful week that

was. I am sure that I can say that there never had been a Feast of Tabernacles like they observed that week, and there probably has not been a greater week than that since then. We can see the fruit of Ezra's ministry, and the fruit of Nehemiah's ministry. What a blessing it must have been to those two men of God!

Concl: Wouldn't you like to see something like this today? We have a privilege that they did not have in that day almost twenty-five hundred years ago. Each of us has a Bible. Most of us have several copies of the Bible, and the Bible in different versions. Are we reading our Bibles? Do you know what it is to weep over the Word of God? Do you know what it is to rejoice over the Word of God, and to find spiritual strength in that joy? Do you long to understand it better than you do? Is that why you are here this morning? And, are you like these Jews were, when they found that they were not doing what they should have been doing, they did it!

If they stood to hear the Word of God read, should we not be faithful in reading it for ourselves, and in listening attentively when others read it to us?

If we are ever to see a revival in our day, a real revival, it is going to come to us through a revived interest in reading and understanding our Bibles. This is the old fashioned way, but it is God's way. It is the way to blessing for us. It is the way to great blessing. Even though not all of the people had built their homes, yet they were filled with joy because of what they were learning from the Word of God.

I know that most of you really love the Word of God, or you would not be here this morning. If people do not want the Word, they are not going to come to Trinity Bible Church. But, oh, let us pray that the Lord will give us a greater love for the Word. Some of you may be more anxious to get the morning newspaper than you are to read your Bible. Ask the Lord to revive your love for the Word, and to help you to understand more of it. As we hear it, understand it, believe it, love it, and obey it, the blessing of God will be upon us.

A MEMORABLE DAY IN ISRAEL
Nehemiah 9

Intro: The book of Nehemiah tells us about the rebuilding of the walls around the city of Jerusalem. The record that the work was completed is given to us in chapter 6. However, there was much that needed to be done regarding the lives of the people of God. Although they were allowed some freedom, yet they were still servants of Artaxerxes and the Persian people. The Israelites had been captured originally by the Assyrians. The Assyrians were conquered by the Babylonians, and it was the Babylonians who led the people of Judah into captivity. In time the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon, and that is where we are in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Time-wise we are considering history that takes us back to the fifth century B.C.

Israel and Judah had been captured by their enemies as a judgment from God. The people had become idolatrous and disobedient to God in every respect. They had rejected the preaching of the prophets, and were determined to persist in their sin. What we are considering in this latter part of the book of Nehemiah, from Nehemiah 7 to the end of the book, is the return of the people to the Lord--a return that took place in their hearts and not just outwardly.

This revival began with Nehemiah when he set two godly men over the city of Jerusalem, and when he set up rules regarding the opening and closing of the gates of the city. He followed this by checking the identity of the people of the city to make sure that the people in the city were really the people who should have been there. Then a request came from the people that the Law of God be read to them. And this is where Ezra came back into the history. He read for half a day while the people stood and listened attentively. It was a time of great joy for the people, although the people wept as they heard the Word of God.

As the Word was read, and as it was also explained to them, they came to that part in the Law which told them about the Feast of Tabernacles. So, even though their homes were not all finished, they obediently observed the Feast of Tabernacles. It started on the 15th day of the month, which was a Sabbath, and extended through the following Sabbath (which would have been the 22nd). The observance of this Feast also produced great joy in the hearts of the people.

What we are going to consider today in Nehemiah 9 took place on the twenty-fourth day of that same month, and it appears to have been a spontaneous action on the part of the leaders and the people. It was a time for the confession of the sins

of the people. It was truly A MEMORABLE DAY IN ISRAEL, and we can call it this for several reasons as we shall see in going through the chapter. No nation is ever greater than when the people of that nation humble themselves before God. This is true for all nations, not just the nation Israel. History is full of examples to teach us that pride is the forerunner of divine judgment. On the other hand, when a people truly humble themselves before God, confessing their sins and seeking divine forgiveness, the result is blessing.

Nehemiah 9 has two parts to it:

- 1) Verses 1-3 give us a description of what took place during the day. It is a summary of the day.
- 2) Verses 4-38 give us the prayer that they prayed.

I will not try to expound the whole chapter verse by verse. That would take more time than we have this morning. But I do want us to carry away with us a real understanding of what took place that day.

With that in mind, let us look for a few minutes at:

I. THE SUMMARY OF THE DAY (Neh. 9:1-3).

It was:

- A. A day of humiliation (v. 1).
- B. A day of the confession of sin (v. 2).
- C. A day in which the Word of God was read to them (v. 3a).
- D. A day not only of confession, but of worship (v. 3b).

There is every evidence that this all came from the hearts of the people. No command was issued for the planning of such a day. They did this because it was in their hearts. It is evident that God was at work for the people to respond as they did.

II. THEIR PRAYER (Neh. 9:4-38).

We see, first of all,

- A. The purpose of their prayer (v. 5b).

Their prayer was to be to God's praise. It was to exalt His "glorious name." Their attention was to be focused upon the very character of God.

On the 9th of January in 1876 Charles Spurgeon preached in the Metropolitan Tabernacle in Newington, England, on one phrase from this 9th chapter of Nehemiah. It is that part of the 17th verse which says, "Thou art a God ready to pardon." He said this by way of introduction:

When a man's conscience is so awakened to the existence of sin that he cannot perceive any plea for mercy within himself, it is his wisdom to look for a plea in the nature and character of God. Now, brethren, if we search ourselves through and through, we cannot find anything in our fallen nature which can recommend us to the Most High. If we think that we have a claim upon God's goodness, we are in darkness, and deceive ourselves. When the true light comes, it reveals our bareness of all merit or excuse, and shows that there is nothing in human nature but that which provokes the Lord. This is the fact as to our condition while we are unregenerate, and oftentimes the true believer, when darkness gathers around him, finds himself to be in much the same condition. His evidences burn dimly, the candle of the Lord seems quenched within his spirit, and, worst of all, the sun of divine favour is not discernible; then groping all around he can discover nothing in himself but that which causes him to sigh and groan, being burdened. In such a plight he should cast overboard the great anchor of faith, and escape from himself to his God. It were well for him always to do so, but especially in the cloudy and dark day. To whom should he turn for light but to the Sun of Righteousness? Where look for grace but to the God of all grace? Where for all but to the All in all? If what I am makes me despair, let me consider what God in Christ is and I shall have hope (Vol. 22, p. 13).

Such words are extremely important for all of us to hear, and to believe. We can be taught to do this, but it seems that when we are as convicted about our sins as the children of Israel were in Nehemiah's day, the Holy Spirit shows us that we need to turn from ourselves and our despair to God Who is our only hope. And so let us learn from their prayer how we should also pray.

What do we see in the prayer after recognizing that they were to praise and glorify the Lord even in confessing their sins?

We see that they continued by recognizing that:

- B. God is the Creator and the Preserver of all things, and that the host of heaven worships Him (v. 6).

We suffer much in our faith because we do not think often enough about God as the Creator and Sustainer of all that He has created both in the heavens and in the earth! We see His power in creation, His wisdom, that He is a God of purpose. We see His goodness.

We are coming to the end of this year, and I hope that you are planning to read your Bible through again next year. Let me suggest that, when you do, you make a notation of all of the references to creation that you can find from Genesis to Revelation. You will be amazed at how many there are! And you also find it very profitable to meditate on them throughout the year. It will greatly increase your knowledge of the Lord, and your enjoyment of the Lord.

The third thing that we see in this prayer is:

C. The cycles apparent in Israel's history (vv. 7-31).

The cycles consist of:

- 1) The original blessing of the Lord upon His people.
- 2) Israel's rebellion against the Lord, which we can call a period of declension, of spiritual decline.
- 3) The mercies of God in restoring the people.
- 4) Another declension.
- 5) Another restoration, etc.

The prayer actually recognized four periods during which the people rebelled against the Lord, and then the Lord extended His mercy to them. Actually there were many, many more than four. There were hundreds of times when individuals, or groups of individuals, or the whole nation, was in rebellion against God. In fact, there was more rebellion than anything else. But in Nehemiah's day the people were looking for any and everything that could give them hope that once again the Lord would extend His mercy to them, and deliver them from the Gentile nations who were over them.

Let us look quickly at the prayer, and I hope that our overview will encourage you to come back to look at it again.

1. The origin and early history of Israel
(vv. 7-15).

Verse 7 and 8 tell us that the origin of the nation was traceable to God. God chose Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham. And God had done what He promised Abraham that He would do. The people declared the righteousness of God.

Verses 9 and 10 tell about God's mercy upon His people when they were in Egypt, and of the deliverance He gave them.

Verses 11 through 15 tell of how the Lord led them through the Red Sea, how He led them by day and night, how He gave them His law at Sinai, and how He faithfully, daily, provided food and drink for them.

2. The first declension (vv. 16-25).

This rebellion against the Lord did not take place after they got into the land; it took place while God was leading them to the land.

They disobeyed the Lord's commandments. They forgot His miracles. They wanted to go back to Egypt. They made a golden calf and worshiped it. And they provoked the Lord in many other ways.

And yet look at what is recorded in the latter part of v. 17. (Read.) And then look at verse 19 with its reference to the Lord's " manifold mercies." He did not stop guiding them. He gave the Holy Spirit to teach them (v. 20). He did not stop feeding them. Verse 21 tells how for forty years He continued to provide for them when they were a nation under judgment. The Lord blessed them with victories over their enemies (v. 22). They multiplied greatly in numbers (v. 23). They went into the land of Canaan, and the Lord gave them victory after victory (vv. 24, 25). And all during this time the Lord was putting up with their disobedience and rebellion.

3. The second declension (vv. 26, 27).

In spite of all of the evidence of God's mercy and His goodness, the people continue to despise God's law, they killed the prophets. When the Lord judged them, they cried out to him in their troubles, and the Lord heard and delivered them from their enemies.

But this only led to:

4. The third declension (vv. 28).

The people were covering a great deal of history from verse 26 on to verse 31. Here in this one verse we see that not long after the Lord delivered the people, they became rebellious again. Yet when they cried out to the Lord, He delivered them, not just once or twice, but "many times." And it was all because of God's "mercies."

5. The fourth declension (vv. 29-31).

Here they mentioned in their prayer how the Lord had tried to

bring His people back to the Law, but they had refused. The Holy Spirit testified against them by the prophets, but they would not listen. Therefore, they were delivered into "the hand of the people of the lands" (v. 30).

- But the most amazing thing is that still the Lord did not consume them, nor forsake them!

D. The main lessons to be learned from their prayer.

There are two lessons that are very obvious up to this point (v. 31).

1. The wickedness of the human heart.

We cannot say that all of the Israelites throughout their history were truly the Lord's people. In fact, we know that there were those who were not, many of them. But the picture which the history of the OT gives us is one in which the people of God in any age are represented by the nation itself. And when you look back in the life of any child of God, you will probably find much more that is bad than you will that which is good. And what makes it even worse, our badness persists in spite of the many, many evidences of the faithfulness and grace of God.

- That is the second lesson:

2. The amazing, inexhaustible grace and goodness and love and mercy of God toward His people.

There are many times when the Lord has to judge us, His people. But He never stops loving us. We can displease Him over and over again, but He never will consume us, nor forsake us. The greatest wonder of the universe is the love of God for His people, and how He keeps on manifesting His mercy even though we grieve Him terribly, and He knows that we will grieve Him again.

What kind of an effect will this have on us? Should it make us feel that we can sin all we want to because the Lord will always extend His mercy to us? Is this the way we feel about it in our hearts?

Let us find our answer at the end of the prayer. What were the leaders and people in Nehemiah's day preparing to do?

- Let us call this last part of the prayer:

E. An appeal in preparation for the covenant
(vv. 32-38).

Verse 32 gives us the one request in the prayer. It is this:

...let not all the trouble
 seem little before thee,
 that hath come upon us...
 since the time of the kings of Assyria
 unto this day.

As we would express it today, they were in big trouble, and they wanted to be assured that the Lord looked upon their situation the way they did. They had the temple, and they had the walls of the city, but they were not free! Their history taught them one thing: The Lord's blessing comes through obedience to the Word of God. Nothing could go right for them unless things were right between them and the Lord. They knew Solomon's words in Prov. 16:7,

When a man's ways please the Lord,
 he maketh even his enemies
 to be at peace with him.

And they knew, too, that we cannot please the Lord if we are living in disobedience to His Word.

So they were seeking to get a hearing with the Lord.

Notice what they recognized about the Lord:

- 1) He was their God--great and mighty and terrible (meaning that He is to be feared). He is capable of doing whatever He chooses to do.
- 2) He was faithful and merciful. And this appeared in its greatest light when contrasted with their great and many sins.
- 3) He was just and right in all that He had done. They deserved all of the judgment they had gotten. They had done wickedly, but the Lord was in the clear. This was a confession of their sin. None of their leaders had obeyed the Lord. Neither had they served the Lord. So now they were serving a Gentile nation, living in bondage.

So what were they going to do? The answer is in chapter 10. They were going to make a covenant with God that they would obey His Word, and start doing the things that they had failed to do in the past.

Concl: It is apparent that Israel's troubles had brought them into a greater understanding of God Himself. It is also clear that they realized that it is not enough to be sorry for the sins of the past. In order to please God we need to make the changes that are pleasing to Him. Again, the words of Solomon may have been a help to them. He wrote in Prov. 28:13,

He that covereth his sins shall not prosper:

but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them
shall have mercy.

We can be sorry for our sins because of the trouble that we have gotten into because of them. Or we can be sorry for our sins because we have grieved our loving and faithful and holy God. He is far more ready to forgive than we are to be forgiven. Let us pray that the Lord will keep us from sin, that we will hate what He hates, and love what He loves. The temple may be there, and the walls may be up. But our chapter teaches us that the blessing will not come until things are right with the Lord.

The same is true with us today. By the grace of God let us seek to be pleasing to the Lord (1) in what we are, (2) in what we do, (3) in what we say, and (4) even in what we think! The Word points the way, and the Spirit will be our Helper. May the Lord give us victory where we have been experiencing defeat.

This was truly A MEMORABLE DAY IN ISRAEL. It will also be A MEMORABLE DAY IN OUR LIVES when we get concerned enough about our sins to do something about them.

A SURE COVENANT, AN UNSURE PEOPLE
Nehemiah 10-13

Intro: This is without question the longest text I have ever taken for a Sunday morning service. But I think that, if you have been reading Nehemiah, you will understand why I am taking such a long section. It is not that any one of these four chapters is unimportant. Every chapter in Scripture is important, and has its place. However, not every chapter is equally important, nor does every chapter adapt itself to the needs we have in a Sunday worship service. Regardless of what part of Scripture we are dealing with, we ought always to be looking for ways in which we can make some applications for our own lives, either facts of history that are important to know, or doctrines that we should all believe, or indications as to how we should live in this world to please God.

For example, chapter 10 is very important because it tells us about "a sure covenant" which the people made with the Lord. That is very important. Chapter 11 tells who was going to live in Jerusalem, and who was going to live in the villages outside of the city of Jerusalem. That is important to know, but the lessons to be drawn from that chapter are not that significant. Chapter 12 lists the priest and Levites, and then tells us about the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem. There is probably one main emphasis in that chapter which we need to take note of. Finally, in chapter 13 we have the basis for the second part of my subject: AN UNSURE PEOPLE. There we see how miserably the people failed the Lord even though they had been so sure in making their covenant that they would do only that which was pleasing to the Lord.

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra are a tremendous commentary on the nature of man. In spite of all the lessons that the people had in their history, all of the warnings, all of the encouragements, all of spiritual teaching, they lived almost like they had no background at all. And yet, through it all we see the godly and faithful leadership which Ezra and Nehemiah provided for the people. But even the influence of these godly men was not enough to keep the people from lapsing into their own disobedience and sin.

So, without ignoring any one of these four chapters, I want to get at the main message of each one, and draw our consideration of this book to a close with this morning's service.

Let us look first at:

I. CHAPTER TEN.

The last verse of chapter 9 tells us about "a sure covenant" that the people had mentioned in their prayer. They had recounted some of the dark pages of Israel's history in their prayer. I call them "dark pages" because sadly they were marked very heavily with the continual disobedience of the nation. That disobedience was the reason the nation had been sent by the Lord into captivity. The actual covenant begins with verse 28, and goes on to the end of the chapter in verse 39.

Many of the people had separated themselves from the Gentiles who were then in the land, and were covenanting together, as we read in verse 29, "to walk in God's law" and to do everything that the Lord had commanded them to do.

Specifically this had to do with four things:

- 1) Not intermarrying with the Gentiles. See v. 30.
- 2) Keeping the Sabbath Day holy. See v. 31.
- 3) To support the service of the Temple. See vv. 32-34.
- 4) To bring their offerings and their tithes to the house of God just as the Lord had ordered it in His Word. See vv. 35-39.

All of this was very commendable. The Mosaic Law taught all of these things. So at last the people seemed headed in the right direction. They seemed determined to please God. This is what they called "a sure covenant."

Let me take just a moment with that title. What is "a sure covenant"?

What is a covenant?

A covenant is a binding agreement in which a person, or persons, solemnly promise to do certain things. Approximately 1,000 years before this God had given His law to Israel. At that time, even before the law was actually given, the people had said, "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do" (Ex. 19:8). This was a covenant like the original covenant. The people of Ezra and Nehemiah's day were saying that they would do what all previous generations had failed to do.

Why did they call it "a sure covenant"?

The word "sure" in Hebrew is from the same root as the word, amen. It meant that it was to be a faithful covenant, a covenant that the people would most certainly keep. It meant that they would not back down on it, but that God could count on their faithfulness.

It was signed by all of those whose names appear at the beginning of chapter 10, and by other whose names are not mentioned but who are referred to in verses 28 and 29.

This was certainly a commendable thing for them to do, but we will have to wait to see how it went. That will come in the 13th chapter.

II. CHAPTER ELEVEN.

This chapter tells us how the people were settled in the land. Verses 1 through 19 tell us who was going to live in Jerusalem. Verses 20 through 36 tells us about those who would live in villages outside of Jerusalem.

We must remember that things were still in disarray within the city, and so there were not many people who wanted to live in Jerusalem. This was true even though the wall of the city was up.

It was decided that 10% of the people would live in the city; 90% would live outside of the city. The fact that many of those who were to live in the city were priests and Levites was an indication that one of the primary concerns of the people in the city was the proper use of the temple. One thing in particular is mentioned in verse 17: "the thanksgiving in prayer." Also in verse 22 we read of "the singers" who "were over the business of the house of God." "Singers" are also mentioned in verse 23. They were to be taken care of. It is obvious that the Lord intended for the service of the temple to be a joyful occupation, not drudgery.

Be sure to keep all of this in mind.

III. CHAPTER TWELVE.

Chapter 12 begins with another list of names, chiefly priests and Levites. And you will notice at the end of the list in verse 26 we have Nehemiah and Ezra spoken of as "the governor" and "the priest, the scribe" respectively. Rarely has the work of the Lord had such gifted and godly leaders as Ezra and Nehemiah were. And yet the nation in its infancy had Moses and Joshua. In the intervening years the people of Israel had many godly judges, prophets, and kings. So the people could not blame their failure upon corrupt leaders. Ezra and Nehemiah were among the most spiritually minded men that the nation Israel ever had. Since the Lord is the One Who sets up kings, and removes them, we can see the goodness of the Lord in encouraging His people with such good leaders.

The latter part of chapter 12, from verse 27 on, we are told

of "the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem."

I won't go into the details that are given here, but once again we need to recognize the good hand of the Lord upon His people. There is a special theme that runs through this chapter also that we need to pay attention to. It is obvious that the Holy Spirit wants us to notice this theme.

The theme is that of joy and rejoicing, singing and musical instruments. Cf. v. 24 in the first part of the chapter, then:

- 1) V. 27. The Levites were "to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgiving, and with singing...."
- 2) In vv. 28 and 29 "singers" are mentioned.
- 3) In v. 31 "two great companies" of the princes of Judah were "appointed" to give thanks.
- 4) In v. 35 "trumpets" are mentioned, and in v. 36 "the musical instruments of David the man of God."
- 5) V. 38 mentions a company of men who "gave thanks."
- 6) V. 40 tells about "the two companies...that gave thanks in the house of God."
- 7) V. 42 says that "the singers sang loud."
- 8) V. 43. (Read the whole verse.)
- 9) V. 45 mentions "singers" again.
- 10) V. 46 seems to indicate that this day of dedication was reminiscent of the days of David over 500 years before.

What can we conclude from this but that the Lord intended His servants to be happy, and His work to bring great joy to the hearts of all who were involved in it.

I think that we would have a very superficial view of the covenant that the people had made for us not to see that such dedication to the Lord not only please the Lord greatly, but brings great blessing as well to the hearts of His people.

There is going to be much singing in heaven, much praise, much worship. So as we look forward to that place of perfect fellowship, we need to get accustomed to singing the praises of the Lord here, and serving Him with gladness. As the people of God, we do not have just one day of thanksgiving every year; every day should be Thanksgiving Day.

IV. CHAPTER 13.

It would have been wonderful if the book of Nehemiah could have closed with chapter 12 when things seemed to be going so well spiritually. But chapter 13 had to be added.

In chapter 9 we have that wonderful prayer of repentance that led to the covenant. In chapter 10 we have the covenant

itself, the pledge that the people made to obey the Word of God which they as a nation had received through Moses. Immediately afterwards the blessings started to come. Chapter 11 tells of how the people got settled in their homes. Verse 12 shows the joy and blessing the people experienced as the wall of Jerusalem was dedicated. But in chapter 13 we see the old troubles beginning to reappear.

Again, let me survey the chapter for you.

There are several tragic circumstances mentioned here:

- 1) The people had been violating God's law that they remain separated from their Gentile neighbors. See v. 3.
- 2) While Nehemiah was away, having gone back to Artaxerxes, Eliashib the priest had made an apartment for Tobiah, of all people, the Ammonite, an avowed enemy of the Lord's people. He was given the very place that was used for the sacrifices in the house of God. So, while he was there, the sacrifices were not offered to the Lord as required. See vv. 4-9.
- 3) The temple service was being neglected. See vv. 10-13.
- 4) The Sabbath Day was being desecrated. See vv. 15-22.
- 5) Intermarriage again was practiced. See vv. 23-31a.

However, interspersed through the verses of this chapter we find that Nehemiah was a very busy man after he came back to Jerusalem. He was "grieved...sore" (v. 8). He "perceived" that things were not right. See v. 9. He "contended" with his people. See vv. 11, 17, 25. He was fearless in his stand against the evil of his day. It did not bother him in the least that he was outnumbered. He testified against the merchants and businessmen who desecrated the Sabbath. See v. 21. He told the Levites to "cleanse themselves" (v. 22). He sought to make right all of the things that had again gone wrong.

But he did more than all of this; he prayed! See his prayers in the following verses:

- 1) V. 14.
- 2) V. 22b.
- 3) V. 29.
- 4) V. 31b--the last words of the book.

His first prayer was a plea to God that his work would not be destroyed. At this point it seemed to Nehemiah that he was back where he had started, that all of years of ministry were for nothing.

His second prayer shows that he feared the judgment of God upon himself and upon his people--and he cried out to the Lord for mercy.

His third prayer showed his grief because the ministry had been corrupted. The saddest thing that ever happens in the Lord's work is when the leaders go bad. When this happens, it is inevitable that the people will follow. This is why anyone in a place of leadership in the work of the Lord, whatever the time-period might be, needs to be careful to walk faithfully with the Lord. Leaders will face a more severe judgment.

His fourth and last prayer shows that Nehemiah believed that, in spite of all the bad things that had taken place, the Lord was able to bring "good" out of it. He believed that the purposes of God could not be destroyed by a disobedient and rebellious people.

Concl: How important it is for governors and priests and prophets and kings and apostles and elders and deacons and fathers to pray! And speaking of fathers, it is good for mothers to stand with them in prayer.

There are times in our lives when it seems that our life work has been destroyed, that it amounts to nothing. Nehemiah not only had to do certain things once, but he had to do them over again. But he teaches us not to be discouraged even though we feel outnumbered and overwhelmed by our troubles. THE PEOPLE WERE UNSURE. They were not to be counted on. Even though they had made A SURE COVENANT, yet it was powerless to change the lives of the people. Only God could do that. And his last prayer indicates that he firmly believed that ultimately God would prevail, and that He would by His own mercy bring blessing even though the people deserved nothing but the worst kind of judgment at His hand.

Look where Israel is today. They are actually just as Godless as any of the other nations of the earth. Their light has become deep darkness. But is God through with Israel? No! Never! But Israel's problems will only get worse "until," as Ezekiel said during the captivity--"until he come whose right it is, and I will give it to him" (Ezek. 21:27). He was speaking of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. What is His "right"? It is His right to reign, to wear the crown and the diadem. Nehemiah stood in his day as a forerunner and type of our Lord Jesus Christ. He did a great work, but not a perfect work. The perfect work is reserved for our blessed Lord when He comes to rule and reign upon the earth. Then Israel will be what she should be, and then the nations of the earth, Arabs, Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, Japanese, Chinese, and all of the rest, will recognize that He is the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

May this be encouraging to us to persevere in the work that

the Lord has called us to do. We as leaders can fail to see what we want to see. The people of God may will to do what is right, but they lack the power. Only God's grace can give us the victory both in our day in a limited way, but also in that day when the Lord comes to reign. His rule will cover the earth, and every knee will bow to Him, confessing that He is Jesus Christ, the Lord, the only One Who can subdue men outwardly, and change them forever inwardly.

I hope that you know Him as your Savior and as your Lord. If not, come to Him today. Put your trust in Him. He alone can save you from your sins.

If your heart is burdened down today with burdens that seem to be crushing the life out of you, be like Nehemiah. Cry out to God to bring His "good" out of all of the bad that has caused you such pain and distress. He will not fail any of us, but He wants us to trust Him. May God enable us to do nothing less than that!