

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Tuesday Bible Class

February 1, 2010

Intro: The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally combined in the Hebrew Bible as one book, and called the Book of Ezra. But now, of course, they appear in our English text as two books. They are very, very important in the history of Israel as the one nation in which the hand of God is always seen in a special way. The book of Ezra records for us, as we have learned in our study of it, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem; the book of Nehemiah, the rebuilding of the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

The hand of God is very evident in both of these books, both from the standpoint of the main men in both books, but also in the way that the Lord moved upon the Persian kings of this period, not only in releasing the Jews to go back to the land, but also in providing much of the funds necessary to do the work that the exiles returned to do, the rebuilding of the Temple under Ezra, and then the rebuilding of the walls primarily under Nehemiah, but Ezra was also involved.

These books are not only about the Jews and the Persians, *but especially about God*. And so we have here in Ezra and Nehemiah an illustration of the fact that the whole Bible is not only from God, *but about God!* And this is its chief importance to us. Nothing is more important in the study of the Bible than the study of God. This is where we find our wisdom, our encouragement, and the truth that results in our own growth in the Lord, our edification.

I would like for you to be reading Nehemiah. For our study it is not so important to read chapters like 3 and 7 and 11 and 12, but it is good to scan them just to be familiar with all of the text. But like our study of Ezra, I am going to be spending our class time on the narrative sections, and so they are the sections that will be important for our study.

(Discuss the outline.)

We learn from the very first chapter of this book that Nehemiah was a man of prayer. Most of the first chapter is a prayer. And throughout the book we frequently find very short prayers, which are called *ejaculatory prayers*. They are short prayers, usually offered suddenly when a special need arises, and always to the point of some current situation. If we are to learn to pray without ceasing, we must learn to pray ejaculatory prayers. We suddenly be faced with a situation where we don't know what to do, or we know what needs to be done, but it is beyond us, and so we utter a short but sincere, and sometimes, urgent prayer to the Lord for His help in some way. This should not be the only kind of praying that we do. In fact, the first prayer of Nehemiah in chapter 1 is not ejaculatory, but it extends from verse 5 to verse 11 at the end of the chapter. So we know that Nehemiah had extended times of prayer, and yet he had the habit of lifting his heart to the Lord in brief prayers as the needs arose. We all need to pray more than we do, and we need to have our extended times of prayer, but also those times when, in a few words, we express a special need to the Lord in prayer. When I leave home in my car, I usually ask the Lord to protect me. When I lose anything (which is getting more frequent), I always seek the Lord's help in finding what I am looking for. It is good to bring everything to the Lord in prayer. We are told in Scripture to do that, and so it is pleasing to the Lord when we do.

My friend, Derek Kidner, says that the events in this book took place in a rather short period of time. It all goes back to 446 or 445 B.C. He says that it all probably began late in 446 and moved on into 445. The time of events in Scripture is not always clear, but those who have studied the history of the time can usually come close to the right date. It is a sequel to the book of Ezra which we have just finished, and both follow closely behind 2 Chronicles. I found one writer who said that just as Haggai and Zechariah need to be read along with Ezra, so Malachi needs to be read along with Nehemiah. So, when you have time, you can add Malachi to your reading

for our study.

1:1-2 In the outline I have given you I have called the first point under the first main heading, “Nehemiah’s call.” The Lord did not actually call Nehemiah in the ordinary sense of the word. He had a friend named Hanani who had evidently been to Israel, or somehow had information about Jerusalem, and Nehemiah asked him about those who had been left in Israel at the time of the captivity and Hanani gave him the answer that we find in verse 3. Not all of the Jews had been taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, and Nehemiah wanted to know how they were getting along.

1:3 The answer that Nehemiah was given was not the answer that he wanted to hear. (Read v. 3.)

1:4 Here we see Nehemiah’s immediate reaction. He wept and mourned for days, and fasted, and prayed “before the God of heaven.” And we have his prayer here in the rest of chapter 1. So we learn two things about Nehemiah. He, like Ezra before him, was a godly man. He dearly loved his people and was overwhelmed to hear about the terrible condition of the people, and of the city itself. Perhaps he knew of the rebuilding of the Temple, and hoped that things would have been better. But they were not! It was evidently such a shock to him that the only one he could talk to about it was the Lord. He “prayed before the God of heaven,” and that is how he addressed God in his prayer. This was a term used to distinguish God in His greatness and His glory from the gods of the earth which actually were not gods at all except for the fact that millions of people thought that they were.

1:5 As he began his prayer, he addressed God as “the God of heaven.” This verse cannot be described in any other way than it showed with what adoration Nehemiah addressed God. He addressed God with the greatest reverence and humility. Keil, in his commentary, says that “the God of heaven” also refers to “God’s almighty government of the world” (p. 159). He called God “great,” meaning *great in every way*, great in His Person, great in His power, and, as Nehemiah went on to say, that God was great in His faithfulness to His people, and especially in His mercy toward them. “Mercy” is the familiar Hebrew word, *chesed*, which can also be translated lovingkindness with which God always expresses His love for His people. “Terrible” would be better translated, *Who causes people to tremble at His presence*. Lange suggested the word *awe-inspiring* (Vol. 4, p. 6). It speaks of how God’s people are taught to fear the Lord, to reverence God because He is God, to hold Him with the greatest awe. “Keeping covenant” is, of course, a reference to the Word of God and to the special place that the people of God in Israel had with God. And they are described as those who love the Lord and obey His commandments. That word, “commandments,” appeared in Nehemiah’s prayer in verse 7 where it is followed with “statutes” and “judgments.” It appears again in verses 8 and 9. Nehemiah was not claiming that the people of God were always as faithful to the Lord as He was to them, but that the people of God can be identified in an ungodly world, as those who love the Lord and who seek to do His will as it is revealed in His Word. Israel was uniquely God’s covenant people.

The phraseology of Nehemiah’s prayer show that he was intimately acquainted with the Law of Moses, especially with Deuteronomy. There is a lesson in this for all of us. The best praying we can do is to turn the Word of God into prayer. It is another indication that prayer and the Word of God go together.

Another important point in this prayer of Nehemiah, is that he began by dwelling upon the character of God. We can call this worship.

1:6 Note the simplicity and yet the power of Nehemiah’s faith. He appealed for God to listen and to see his prayer, not here the condition of the people in Israel, but to hear and see his prayer for them. Nehemiah knew that we never tell God anything that He does not already know, but in simple faith he wanted to make

sure that God was listening to his prayer. The fact that Nehemiah mentioned that he had been praying “day and night” indicates that it had been several days at least since he had heard what was told him in verse 3, and that the news had moved him to pray continuously for God’s people who had been left in Israel.

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Nehemiah’s prayer here sounds like Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple. See 1 King 8:28 and 29:

28 Yet have thou respect unto the prayer of thy servant, and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to hearken unto the cry and to the prayer, which thy servant prayeth before thee to day:

29 That thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place of which thou hast said, My name shall be there: that thou mayest hearken unto the prayer which thy servant shall make toward this place.

See also verses 49 through 52 in the same chapter and prayer:

49 Then hear thou their prayer and their supplication in heaven thy dwelling place, and maintain their cause,

50 And forgive thy people that have sinned against thee and all their transgressions wherein they have transgressed against thee, and give them compassion before them who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them:

51 For they be thy people, and thine inheritance, which thou broughtest forth out of Egypt, from the midst of the furnace of iron:

52 That thine eyes may be open unto the supplication of thy servant, and unto the supplication of thy people Israel, to hearken unto them in all that they call for unto thee (1 Kings 8:49-52).

So Nehemiah had learned to pray by reading and studying the prayers of his predecessors. The Jews had their regular hours for prayer, but special requests called for added hours of prayer which Nehemiah expressed with the words, “day and night.”

Nehemiah also showed that by his recognition of the character and faithfulness of God, he not only was led to confess “the sins of the children of Israel,” but also of his own sins and the sins of his father’s house. This led him to use the first person plural pronoun “we” in verse 7.

1:7 Here we have Nehemiah’s confession of sin on behalf of himself, his family, and the nation. And in doing so he gives us a definition of sin. It is by not keeping, or obeying, the word which the Lord had given to His servant Moses. Moses lived about a thousand years before Nehemiah, but notice that the passage of time had brought about no change in the Word of God. What was sin in Moses’ day, was still sin in Nehemiah’s day.

Here Nehemiah used three words, all of which referred to the Word of God: “commandments . . . statutes” and “judgments.” It seems that most expositors do not try to define the difference between commandments, statutes, and judgments, and Lange says that it is “almost impossible to draw the distinction between the meanings of these three words” (Op.cit.) Nehemiah seems to be saying that there is not much in the Law that the children of Israel have not transgressed. And in doing so, as is always the case with sin, they had not only displeased and grieved God over and over, but in the process had corrupted themselves. As we have learned from Psalm 23, the Lord leads us in the paths of righteousness, not of unrighteousness, which is sin.

And so, as one commentator put it, Nehemiah stood empty-handed before God. He had not a single claim to make upon the Lord but that He would be faithful to them even though they had not been faithful to Him. So Nahemiah’s only hope was in the love, the mercy, the grace of God.

But he did have one specific basis upon which to look to the Lord for hope. *That was in the Word of God itself, the Word which the Lord had given to Moses.* What was it? Look with me at verses 8 and 9.

1:8 Nehemiah knew something very important about God and prayer that we might even call *a secret*, not because it is unknown, but because it is little known and certainly not employed by the people of God in their praying. It is this: God loves for us to remind Him about what He has said in His Word. It is not because God is forgetful, but He loves to hear us tell Him what He has said to us in His Word. Imagine telling God to remember His own word. If suddenly every Bible in the world would be destroyed, and the memory of it erased from the minds of His people. If every trace of it were erased from books and recorded messages, it would be no problem for the Lord to reproduce it exactly like it is today. So the enemies of God may as well not destroying every Bible because the Lord would produce it again before His enemies would get their work done. Of course, they wouldn't be able to do such a thing. Our Lord even said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35).

So instead of saying to the Lord, "Remember . . .," Nehemiah could have said, "I remember," or "We remember," because I am sure that many of them knew what Nehemiah was going to pray in his prayer. At least they were not surprised at the content of his prayer. And one interesting thing about what Nehemiah said here in his prayer, is that he did not give the Lord a direct quotation of any passage in the Law that the Lord had said. But Nehemiah did have in mind God's promise to His people, like the words recorded in Deuteronomy 4:25-40. **(Read.)** Or maybe it was Deuteronomy 30:1-10. **(Read.)** Probably it was both.

Now let's read Nehemiah's prayer in verses 8 and 9. Verse 8 was history. The people had been in captivity. Many still were. Verse 9 was their God-given hope. Did they deserve it? Absolutely not. Did that change it? No! But verse 9 did tell them what they needed to do. Their hope was not in what other nations might do to their enemies, but their hope had to be in God. Note what Nehemiah reminded the Lord of what He had promised to do for His people. But Nehemiah prefaced in His prayer what the people needed to do.

1:9 There were three things that Nehemiah knew from the Word that the people needed to do according to verse 9:

- 1) They needed to turn to the Lord.
- 2) They needed to keep His commandments.
- 3) They needed to do them, *i.e.*, to obey them.

We could translate the word that Nehemiah used for "turn," *to turn back*. Their trouble had started in their hearts, in their relationship with the Lord. The Lord's people who fall into sin have already turned from the Lord in their hearts. The trouble begins inwardly before anyone sees it outwardly, including the person who has turned away. That is why all of us need to beware of any signs of unbelief, or rebellion, or even coldness of heart toward the Lord. We might be able to hide it for a time, but eventually it will come out. When we lose our delight in the Word of God, and do not enjoy going to church, when we set our minds on worldly things, these are all danger signs. So to turn (back) to the Lord may calls for a lot of changes in a person's life. I am sure that most of the Jews who found themselves bowing down to idols, or sacrificing their children to heathen gods, never thought that they would ever do such things when they first started to turn away from the Lord. The Christian life is a life of fellowship with the Lord. And so if anything begins to influence that fellowship in a negative way, trouble is ahead. We need to turn to the Lord the first thing in the morning, and stay turned to Him throughout the day. Turn to Him as you go to bed at night. If anything you are doing turns you away even for a short time, stop doing it. The price of continuing is too great.

There is an OT expression that illustrates what it means to turn to the Lord. You will find it in Psalm 16:8.

This is what that verse says:

I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved (Psa. 16:8). And there is another verse which shows the result of not setting the Lord before yourself. King David wrote it about his enemies. It is found in Psalm 54:3. David said,

3 For strangers are risen up against me, and oppressors seek after my soul: they have not set God before them. Selah.

This is the reason that non-Christian people are like they are, and why they live the way they do. This is why the people of the world don't like Christians, and why they don't like Jews. They do not know God. They do not take Him into consideration. A lot of them say that there is no God, when in their hearts they know that there is. But they don't do anything about it. On the contrary we need to turn to the Lord and to be continually thinking of Him. That will have a transforming affect upon our lives, keeping us from turning away from Him.

The second thing that Nehemiah recognized that he and the people needed to do was to "keep the commandments." Usually when we think of keeping the commandments, we think of obeying them. But here in Nehemiah's prayer that comes third. To keep the commandments is, first of all, to mark them, find out what they are, and then guard them like you would if someone were trying to take them away from you. Now we on this side of the Cross are not required to do many of the things that the people of God did in OT times, such as offering animal sacrifices, observing certain feast days, and so on. But there are many things in the OT that we need to do, and, of course, when we add to them what we are commanded to do, or not do, which we find in the NT, hundreds more commandments are added to the list. Let me ask you, have you ever read your Bible marking in some way the commandments that apply to you as a believer in Christ? This is a part of what it means to keep the commandments. Before you can obey them, you need to know what they are. And that is a good place for every Christian to start. But we also need to continue doing it.

The third thing is that we need to "do them." But we can't do it on our own any more than we can save ourselves. The Apostle Paul learned this early in his life as a Christian. And he wrote about it in Philippians 2: 12-13:

12 Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

13 For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

The Lord gave the children of Israel the Law of Moses knowing that they could not keep it. And He has given us the commandments mainly of the NT, knowing that we can't keep them. But God works in us, and Christ lives in us, and the Holy Spirit dwells in us, so we have no excuses that will stand before God. We obey the commands of Scripture, the positive one and the negative ones, by the enabling power of the Godhead. Then the impossible becomes possible.

There is a lot in this prayer of Nehemiah, isn't there? But now let us go on to verse 10.

1:10 Nehemiah, this dear man of God, knew that he had another strong point in pleading for the blessing of God upon the Jews who were "in great affliction and reproach" (1:3), and whose walls were broken down, and whose gates were still as they had been for many years, burned with fire.

How did the Jews become Jews? Here was a most powerful point in Nehemiah's prayer. **(Read verse 10.)** Nehemiah knew that he was making a point here which would really touch the heart of the Lord. How did the Jews become Jews? God made them His people. They were His servants whom He had redeemed by His great power and strong hand. You know, I believe Nehemiah predated Calvin. He believed in election. He believed in the sovereignty of God. He believed in the grace of God, and the Jews had proved that their position with God could only have been based on grace. They were showing how unworthy they were, how undeserving, and

even how ungrateful they were as shown by the lives that they had lived. They should have suffered for what they had done. They should have been cast away by God, and forgotten. But Nehemiah knew the Lord well enough to know that the Lord would not let them go, and that He will never forsake them, but will fulfill all of the purposes He had in mind for them before creation itself.

And how wonderful to take this OT situation and know that the same applies to us who are in the Church, the body of Christ. When we talk about believers who have sinned against the Lord, don't we have to say "we" instead of just "they"? Don't we have many reasons for being just as thankful that the Lord keeps us as we are that He saved us in the beginning? Can't we say that the Lord has judged us less than we deserve, as Ezra did? We wouldn't be here today if it were not for the mercy and grace of God. All of the punishment that these OT saints deserved, and which we deserve as well, were charged to our Lord Jesus Christ, and He paid for every sin that His people would ever commit, past, present, and future. Oh, how this should cause us to keep turning our eyes and our hearts on the Lord so that our sins would be kept to a minimum. I will tell you that there have been a lot of failures on my part since the Lord saved me, but none on the Lord's side. You and I may have complicated His work for us many times, but He is not going to give up on any of us. What a God, and what a Savior!

Now for the last verse in Nehemiah's prayer which is also the last verse in chapter 1.

1:11 This is the third time in his prayer that Nehemiah used the word "beseech." See it in verses 5, and again in 8. This is a word of entreaty, of supplication. It shows the greatness of the burdens that were upon the heart of Nehemiah. It is similar in its meaning to Jacob's prayer in Genesis 32:26 as he wrestled with the Lord, and said, "I will not let thee go, except Thou bless me." No mortal ever prayed more earnestly and intently than Nehemiah did here in chapter 1. It was a kind of *I am not going to take no for an answer* attitude, although Nehemiah prayed with the greatest reverence and respect for God. He believed that he was not only praying with the Jews but for them and for their city. And it was only God Who could answer such a prayer and lift such great burdens.

Notice the expression in that phrase with reference to the Jews, whom he called the Lord's servants, and said that they "desire to fear Thy Name." This is the opposite of taking the Lord's Name in vain. To fear the Name of the Lord is to give Him the honor and the submission of which He is so deserving. Solomon said that this is "the beginning of wisdom." In my Bible reading through the years I have written down verses which deal with the same subject, for example, of creation. For the past several months I have been writing down the references of verses that speak of the fear of God, or fearing God. And I have read two books which speak of this great subject. One was written by Jerry Bridges, and the other was written by John Bunyan. Both books were a tremendous blessing to me. There probably is no one expression in the Bible that expresses more closely what the Lord desires in our relationship with Him. Fearing the Lord is putting the Lord first in our lives, submitting to His will, seeking always to glorify Him, hating any and everything that He hates, and loving all that He loves. The Lord would ask no more of the Jews than that they fear Him. Nor does He desire anything more from us. Christians used to be known as God fearing people. We ought to pray that that day will come again. This was what Nehemiah and Ezra were. And we meet with many other God fearing people as we read our Bibles from cover to cover. God always has those who fear Him. And when Nehemiah said that the Lord people in that day desired to fear Him, he meant that they had made an one hundred and eighty degree change in their attitude toward the Lord. What a blessing this must have been to Nehemiah to be able to say this to the Lord in his prayer.

Now Nehemiah had two great burdens upon his heart as he prayed this prayer:

1) For the people, and their condition spiritually.

2) For Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of her walls.

Nehemiah believed that He could see that God was answering His first request. But he nevertheless continued to pray for the people. But now, as he finished this prayer, he added a request for what he had in his heart to do. That was to seek permission from King Artaxerxes to go back to Jerusalem to lead the people in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. And he asked the Lord to grant him mercy with "the man," referring to the King, not showing disrespect but recognizing that the greatest of men on the earth are still only men, but all men are under the authority of "the God of heaven."

The rest of the book of Nehemiah tells us how wonderfully God answered both requests. And it ought to be an encouragement to all of us to know that the God Who answered Nehemiah's prayers is the God Who waits for us to come to bring our worship and our supplications to Him.

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Please consult the outline which I gave to you at the beginning of our study of Nehemiah two weeks ago. You will see that the first major division of this book has to do with the rebuilding of the walls in Jerusalem. And we have this in chapters 1 through 6. Nehemiah, a Jew in exile, was the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, and the place was Shushan which had been made the capital of the Persian Empire. Some think that Cyrus made it the capital; others think that it was Darius. Whatever the facts are, that is where Artaxerxes had his palace or castle.

At the end of chapter 1 Nehemiah said that he was the king's cupbearer. That is, he was Artaxerxes' personal servant, or one of them. So he had a very high position and had the confidence and trust of the King. Lange says that the Oriental despots, such as Artaxerxes, love to have men of royal blood to wait upon them. So this indicates that Nehemiah was a member of the King of Judah. Chapter 1 gives us much evidence that Nehemiah was a very godly man as we can see from his prayer. He was also characterized by great patience, as we can see from his prayer. However, by the end of chapter 1 there was no evidence that Nehemiah's prayer was going to be answered, but the last words of his prayer showed that he knew that humanly speaking the desire of his heart could only be satisfied by the permission of King Artaxerxes. But his prayer indicates that Nehemiah knew that his case was really in the hands of God.

The event in chapter 1 when Nehemiah learned about the condition of Jerusalem was in the month Chisleu, was the ninth month of the year. The events of chapter 2 were in the month Nisan, which was the first year of their calendar. So four months had elapsed since Nehemiah had heard the bad news. Those four months must have been given to prayer by Nehemiah in as much time as he could spare from fulfilling his duties to the King.

2:1 Verse 1 tells us that there was a difference in Nehemiah's appearance on this particular day. He evidently had been able to conceal his distress about his people until this particular time. But it would seem that he was unable to keep his sorrow a secret from the King. Expositors point out that it was really almost a crime for a servant to be sad in the King's presence, and could cost a servant his position and maybe even his life! So even though one expositor says that Nehemiah deliberately showed his sorrow in the king's presence. But I doubt that. He had concealed it for four months. I rather believe that day by day the burden was getting heavier and heavier on Nehemiah's heart until he could not cover it up any longer

2:2 Artaxerxes saw that he was sad, and knew that he was not sick, and so he said, "This is nothing else but sorrow of heart. So the King knew that Nehemiah was not acting like he was sad, but that he was deeply grieved about something. And so he asked Nehemiah what was wrong. And then it was that fear filled

Nehemiah's heart, thinking of what the consequences might be for him. But he did not try to excuse himself in any way, but he went on to tell the King the truth.

2:3 Nehemiah simply and sincerely told the king what was wrong. Lange pointed out in his commentary that the word "sad" in verses 1, 2, 3, and "sorrow" in verse 2 all carry the idea of something *bad*. So the King probably knew that Nehemiah was usually a happy person, and that something must be terribly wrong for him to look like he did.

The city of Jerusalem (which he did not mention by name) was very precious to believing Jews because it was there that the Lord had chosen to put His Name. It became a symbol to them, and rightly so, of the presence of the Lord, the place where the Lord had chosen to be with His people. So the fact that the walls of the city had never been rebuilt reminded the Jews that God had withdrawn His presence and His blessing from them, and this is what in particular grieved Nehemiah. The mention of his father's tombs was a reminder to Nehemiah of days in Israel when the walls were standing and the Temple was there, speaking of God's presence even though a lot had gone on in Israel's past history which was very displeasing to God. But the godliness of Nehemiah was a reminder that God always had some of His people who were faithful to Him. But when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, the godly suffered along with the ungodly.

2:4 It was characteristic in those days that when a person expressed sadness before another, that there was some reason why the sad person did not hide his sadness. I don't believe that Nehemiah was sad in order to present a request to the King. I believe that he appeared sad because he could no longer hide it. And there is a great difference between those two ideas. So the King said, "For what dost thou make this request?"

And then we come to a statement which we learn from this book of Nehemiah which revealed a habit that Nehemiah had in his relationship with God. I don't believe that the King knew what Nehemiah was doing. His lips did not move. No audible word was heard by the King. But silently in his heart Nehemiah had learned that prayer did not have to be as long as his prayer was in chapter 1. Prayer can be just two or three words. Or the Lord considers it a prayer when one of His children quickly turns to Him in thought, looking for some kind of help. We are going to see Nehemiah doing this throughout this book. It is called ejaculatory prayer. It is a sudden, short prayer to God. And it can have many purposes.

You are driving your car, and all of a sudden another car darts in front of you, and you almost have an accident. So you say, "Thank you, Lord." That is an ejaculatory prayer. Or you are a student school, and the teacher gives your class an expected pop quiz. And so you suddenly pray, "Help me, Lord." That is an ejaculatory prayer. Or you sit down to read your Bible, and before you read you say to the Lord, "Teach me, Lord, what you want me to learn from my reading." That is longer than the other prayers, but it is still ejaculatory.

We are told here about what Nehemiah did. "So I prayed to the God of heaven." He did not go into another room to pray. He did not drop to his knees to pray. Nor did he take a long time to pray. The conversation with the King continued uninterruptedly, but Nehemiah, shall I say, "shot up" a prayer to the Lord. He had learned to pray "on the go." Chapter 1 tells us that there were times when Nehemiah fasted and prayed, prayed for days at a time. But He knew what it was to be in touch with the Lord throughout the day. The Bible calls this praying without ceasing, or praying with all prayer, all kinds of prayer. But at the first sign of trouble, or a need, or just when we want to praise the Lord while we are driving to church, or preparing a meal, or mowing the lawn, those are just a few times when we need to pray ejaculatory prayers. Or when you see someone else in need, or unexpectedly meet a friend. There are circumstances we have on any day of the week that call for ejaculatory praying. Suddenly King Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah a question which did not expect to hear: "For what dost thou make this request?" And then after praying he proceeded to tell the King what he wanted to do.

In Nehemiah 4:4-5 we have an ejaculatory prayer. It is a little longer than some, but it was a sudden prayer to God for help. See also 4:9. And 5:19. And the end of 6:9. Then 6:14. We all need to cultivate the habit of ejaculatory prayer.

2:5 Notice how graciously Nehemiah answered the King's question. The King had asked Nehemiah a simple question, and Nehemiah gave the King a simple, but, as I have said, a gracious answer.

God had obviously been dealing with Nehemiah about this. Many people will see a problem, but will not think of what they might do to solve the problem. We may pray for someone else to solve it, or think that because we have prayed, it will somehow be solved. But Nehemiah, who had to be very comfortable in his job with the King, asked the King if he could go to do something that I am sure he had never been trained to do. But that did not stop Nehemiah. He knew that if the Lord had laid this burden on his heart, it must mean that the Lord intended for him to do something about it. Now the Lord does not always answer and lead as He did Nehemiah, but he did here. And we can thank the Lord who are always looking for things to do, needs to meet, because the Lord is the One Who makes people like that.

2:6 Here is the King's answer. He wanted to know how long he would be gone, and when he would come back. Now remember this the King talking to a slave. The King's questions were obviously put on his heart by the Lord. Most kings would have told Nehemiah to forget it. But the Persian kings were a different breed from the usual monarchs. And all of the glory for their attitude goes to the Lord.

By the way, when you read a passage like this, does it move you to offer the Lord an ejaculatory prayer for Artaxerxes and the other Persian kings, that they were so good to Nehemiah, and Ezra, and all of the exiles that they permitted to go back to Judah. You see, we can thank the Lord for what He did years ago just like we thank Him for what He is doing today, and may do tomorrow. "In everything give thanks." Always be on the lookout for things for which you can praise God. Subjects for praising God are everywhere.

The mention of the King's wife probably means two things: one, that she was in agreement with the King's decision to let Nehemiah go back to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and, two, that she may have been partially responsible for the King's action. When God is working to accomplish anybody, or anything, He always has the right people present to see that His will is done when they may not even be aware of the fact that God is the One Who is behind everything.

We are actually told that it pleased the King to send Nehemiah to Jerusalem. That is evidence of God's work in the King's heart. He had asked Nehemiah to say how long he would be gone, and when he would come back. It is important to see that the King wanted Nehemiah to come back. Often we as Christians behave so that the people of the world are glad to see us go, but that was not how Artaxerxes felt about Nehemiah.

Then Nehemiah made two other requests of the King: one in verse 7, and a second one in verse 8. He needed two letters.

2:7 Nehemiah had given some thought to that which would be required for such a project. So he was not a dreamer, but he was realistic. Between Shushan and Jerusalem he would need to pass through other territories over which Artaxerxes ruled, with governors appointed by the King. It was part of the responsibility of these governors to protect the territories over they had jurisdiction. So Nehemiah knew that he would need evidence that what he was doing had the approval of the King. And it did.

2:8 Nehemiah would also need "timber to make beams for the gates and other places that he and the people

would be working on. There was a lot of work to be done, and it would require a lot of lumber.

The King gave both of these letters to Nehemiah. And I am sure that he was very grateful to the King. But Nehemiah did not just look at the things and the people who could be seen, but he, like all true men of God, had a special appreciation of the things that most men cannot see. Cf. 2 Corinthians 4:18:

18 While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

As evidence of this, it is recorded that Nehemiah said, “And the King granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.” And this is not the last time that we will run across this expression in the book of Nehemiah. Cf. Proverbs 21:1, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.” See also verse 18 of our chapter. And if this is true of the king’s heart, the one who has the greatest authority in a nation, the same has to be true of all lesser people. Everyone’s heart is in the hand of the Lord. God moves in many marvelous and wonderful ways for the accomplishment of His will. And we need to remember this. It is just as true today as it ever has been.

Derek Kidner made this statement on how all of this came to pass:

But the decisive factor, as he recognized, was not his faith, but the object of it: the God Who was his God, whose *good*, (*i.e.*, gracious) *hand* was upon him (p. 81).

In Ezra 7:6 we see that Ezra recognized this same unseen influence in his ministry. But there, as here in Nehemiah, men had their part. Ezra and Nehemiah asked for what they needed, and both got it, but the glory did not belong to them, but to the good hand of God upon them. Kidner said that this is like a refrain which runs through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. God moved them to ask (backed by their prayers), and God move the kings to give. So all of the glory belongs to God, for His faithfulness and His goodness to His people.

We are not told anything about Nehemiah’s journey to Jerusalem, but the next three verses, especially verse 9, tell us that how Nehemiah got there, and what they found when they got there.

2:9 The letter from the king to the governors worked, so Nehemiah had no trouble with them. To a great extent the success of the trip that Nehemiah and the people who were with him had made was because King Artaxerxes had sent with them “captains of the army and horsemen” to see that they all arrived safely. So far, so good. But a different situation developed according to verse 10.

2:10 We are told about two men who were strongly opposed to what Nehemiah had come to do. It is here that we meet Sanballat and Tobiah. They are mentioned again in verse 18 of this chapter. And then they are mentioned also in 4:1, 7; 6:1, 2, 5, 12, 14; 13:28.

It is thought that Sanballat was a Moabite, and it is known that Tobiah (a Jewish name) was an Ammonite. And there had been up to this time a history of hatred of the Moabites and the Ammonites, for Israel. They were descendants of Lot’s two sons which he had by his daughters in that terrible story which followed the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. These were evidently men of great influence and they were out to oppose any good thing that might be done for the Jews. Unfortunately the attitude that they had has been present against the Jews throughout their history, and is especially prominent today in Iran whose leadership is dedicated to the total destruction of Israel. Here in verse 10 of Nehemiah, chapter 2, we are told that “it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.”

So we learn from the book of Nehemiah, as we did from the book of Ezra, that the people of God have always had their enemies. We learn also that when there is evidence of great blessing among the people of God, the Devil is always at work. The Devil’s first appearance in Scripture is as the enemy of God and of the truth. And

that is continued throughout the Scripture, finding its greatest illustration in the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are inclined to think that in times when the Lord's blessing is strong, that the Devil and his forces will be silent. But just the opposite is true. When God blesses, the Devil fights. It is often true that when a person is saved, they immediately are subjected to great temptations. When the people of God are determined to walk more closely with the Lord, the Devil, along with the world, and the Christian's flesh, all seem to rise up in opposition together. But that is the time for us to be especially "strong, and in the power of His might" which Paul exhorted us to be in that great passage in the latter part of Ephesians 6. The Apostle John tells us that "greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Nehemiah, as we learn in the latter part of our chapter, refused to "give place to the Devil" (Eph. 4:27).

For Sanballat and Tobiah to be mentioned before it is stated in verse 11 that Nehemiah got to Jerusalem, suggests that they may have thought of doing something to keep Nehemiah from ever getting into the city. But the Lord had provided a part of King Artaxerxes' army and horsemen to protect Nehemiah and those who were with him, there was nothing that they could do about it. It seems that there were very few even in Jerusalem knew that he was coming, and that probably was a part of what Nehemiah did to keep his trip and the purpose of it, quiet.

2:11 This verse tells us of Nehemiah's safe arrival in Jerusalem. This is exactly what is said when Ezra arrived in Jerusalem thirteen years before. There were three days before either of them did anything except probably to rest after the long journey, and to spend time in prayer, seeking further guidance from the Lord.

2:12 Notice in verses 12, 13, and 15 it is stated that Nehemiah did all of his surveying by "night." From verse 12 down through verse 16, and the three times that the word "night" is used, we probably have the explanation of what he did on those three days. Except for the few men who were with him, he did not tell any others about, as he said, "what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem." Probably he did his surveying at night because he did not want Sanballat or Tobiah, or others who might have opposed him, to know what he was doing. How much the two evil men knew, we are not told, and so it is a waste of time to speculate. They knew enough to be planning what they would do.

2:13 Here in verse 13 we are told that on the second night Nehemiah saw firsthand the condition of the walls and the gates of the city, the news that had caused such great distress for him when he first learned about them.

2:14 Also on the second night he saw the ruins of the city which made it impossible for the animal on which he was writing to get through. It was a tremendously large work that he would have to do.

2:15 This was the third night of his survey, and with this his survey was completed. He knew at this time the full extent of the work that was before him.

2:16 It is quite amazing that after all of this time neither the rulers, nor the people, nor the priests, nor the nobles, knew that he was there, and so there was no possibility that they could have known what he had come to do.

2:17 But at this point he told them!

Nehemiah made no attempt to minimize the task that was before them. It would have been easy for the people who had lived there any time at all, to get so accustomed to all of the ruins, that it did not bother them like it

would like it affected Nehemiah who was seeing it all for the first time. The Babylonians had done a thorough job of destroying the city. The Temple had been restored, but that was all. And it does not seem that Nehemiah saw the Temple. He had wanted to see what remained to be done.

2:18 Nehemiah made no attempt to minimize the damage that had been done to the city and to the walls. But he issued a challenging command to the people. And this was it: “Come, let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.”

What bothered Nehemiah was not the fact that with the walls down, Jerusalem had not security, but it was the disgraceful condition of the city where God had chosen to place his name, the city of the greatest King of all, and which was to have been “the joy of all the earth.” So it was not the reproach that was on the Jewish people that bothered Nehemiah, but the reproach and shame that their continued disobedience had brought upon the Name of the Lord. That is what Kidner called “the debit side.”

But on the positive side he mentioned “the hand of my God which was good upon me,” and “the king’s words that he had spoken unto me.” Notice that he put God first, and then the king. And that is the right order. The king would never have agreed to such a project if it had not been for the hand of God upon him.

And then the Lord did another amazing work, and we see this in the response of the people. They could so easily have said, “You might think the rebuilding of the city can take place, but we would have done it long before now if we thought it could be done.” And they could have turned against Nehemiah and rejected his challenge to them. But what do we read? Just the opposite! The people said, “Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.” How amazing this is, and it is amazing because God is amazing! Only He could have gotten such a response from the people.

2:19 Then came Sanballat and Tobiah. And they have another enemy with them, Geshem, the Arabian. What was their response to the people? They laughed at them, and took up the same charge against them that the enemies of Israel had taken up in Ezra’s day. They “despised them,” and said that this is nothing but a massive rebellion against the King of Persia.

In verse 20 we have Nehemiah’s response to them.

2:20 Nehemiah did not falter in the least. Was it because he minimized the trouble that these three men could do to their plans? No! He knew that they were very dangerous enemies. No, he did not minimize what they could do, nor did he glory in what the Jews would do, but he gloried in what the God of heaven was going to do. Nehemiah said, “He will prosper us.”

How blessed the Jews were to have leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, and prophets like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi! And how blessed the Jews were to have a God like God is! He is a God of grace for a people who had brought God’s judgment upon themselves. And now He was showing Himself to be a God with good hands Who was totally sufficient to meet all of the needs of His people, materially, physically, and spiritually – the last being by far the most important.

And so we come to the close of another amazing chapter in the Word of God. And we are to realize that the God Who was sufficient for His people in Nehemiah’s day is the same God today, and able to meet our needs as He did theirs.

February 22, 2010

Chapter 3 tells us about the beginning of the work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. We are told who the workers were, and the part of the wall each person worked on. The chapter indicates that the work was done, for the most part, with great diligence, enthusiasm, and by people of all classes. One man, according to verse 12, had his daughters working with him. A lot planning had to be done in assignment the people to the various places on the wall that they were to work. There is only one indication of those who did not cooperate. This mentioned in verse 5. It had to do with people from Tekoa, a small town in Judah which was not far from Bethlehem. We are told that some from Tekoa entered into the work, but that their nobles did not work. Dr. Kidner questions the translation of the word “Lord” here, thinking it may refer to their “*lords*,” or *supervisors*. Pride somehow seems to have been the cause. We see this in the statement that “their nobles put not their necks to the work,” which could mean that they were stiffnecked.

But, on the whole, chapter 3 is an encouraging report of what the people did after they found out why Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem. The Lord had not only worked in the heart of Nehemiah, but it is clear that He had worked also in the heart of the Jewish exiles who were back in Jerusalem.

Now we come to chapter 4. From this point on to 6:14 the emphasis is upon the great opposition that the Jews had in the work of constructing the wall of Jerusalem led by the same men who had already shown their unhappiness at what Nehemiah had come to do. In the outline which I have given you this is the fourth point under the first division of this book. I have simply called it,

D. Opposition to the work (4:1-6:14).

After the clearly optimistic emphasis about the builders and the building that Nehemiah gave in chapter 3, we learn that the enemies of the Jews and what they were doing, were still there, and that their numbers were increasing. We can draw some very important lessons from these chapters for ourselves today. We can always be sure of the blessing of the Lord when we do His will. But we can be just as sure that there will be opposition from the outside, and often even from within the ranks of the Lord’s people.

4:1 We first heard about Sanballat and Tobiah in chapter 2, verse 10, and then in the same chapter, verse 19. In this last verse the name of Geshem is added to the list of enemies. When these men first learned of

Nehemiah’s mission, they didn’t like it, but their reaction in 2:19 seems to indicate that they were inclined to take lightly Nehemiah’s report. And so they reacted with scorn and laughter. But now with the work underway and that much of the work had been done, he was not only grieved, but he was angry, greatly indignant, and so he did as he had done before, and resorted to mockery. He ridiculed them meaning that he scorn them with such words as we find them using. The idea is that he scorned them by saying about them, and to them, what right did they have to even think that they could accomplish such a task. And, from a human standpoint, it did appear foolish. As far as we know none of them had ever been involved in such a project. But then you think back to the days when the Lord delivered the Israelites from Egypt, none of them had had any experience either in what was ahead of them. But the secret, so to speak, of that time and this time, is that God was in it all. They had not done all of this on their own. God burdened Nehemiah to do this. God moved the heart of Artaxerxes to let Nehemiah go back to Jerusalem. And, as in the days of Ezra before Nehemiah, God saw to it that the exiles got back to Jerusalem. So in the final analysis, Sanballat and his cronies were opposing God, and so they were doomed to failure from the beginning.

This is why we need to be as certain as we can be about the will of God before we start any project. Nehemiah

waited upon the Lord many days. And then it was God Who brought it to Artaxerxes' attention, and led him to ask Nehemiah why he was so sad on that particular day. Great things can be done by a single person, or by a comparatively small group, if God is in it. We always get ourselves into trouble if and when we run ahead of the Lord.

Verse 2 gives us a sample of some of the things that Sanballat was saying.

4:2 Here we have five questions that Sanballat was asking. (Read them.) I am sure that these cut many of the Jews to heart. Perhaps some of them were asking these very questions to themselves. When they considered their numbers in comparison to the enemies they had, and how weak each one of them was, how could they possibly undertake such a project with the hope of accomplishing it? A good question.

The question, "Will they fortify themselves?," followed from the first question. In the margin of my Bible are two possibilities as to the meaning of this question. One was, "Are they depending upon themselves for this task?" Or it could even be a question which they might answer that they were fortifying themselves in their God. I think we all know how meaningless it sounds to unsaved people when we talk about trusting the Lord and depending upon Him to help us.

The third question seems to mean, "Who is going to pay for all of this?" It was clear that these former captives of Babylon and Persia did not have the funds themselves to pay for such a massive project. They evidently did not know how Darius had provided for the building of the temple, and that Artaxerxes had already made provisions for the exiles return. But, even more important than these things, the Jews had the promises of God. It was God Who had given them the city, and Who had provided through David and Solomon for the building of the first Temple. But again, this was a good question.

The fourth question was, "Did they think that they could finish such a job even if they began it? Matthew Poole suggested that they might have been seeking to torment that they could not finish the job in time for some approaching feast day. But it simply could have meant, "How long do you think it will take you people to finish such a project?"

Finally, question five. "Where are you going to get the materials for such a massive job?" All you have are burned and broken stones. Even if you have the money, often the materials are not available.

Do you remember some questions that the Lord asked when He was teaching on a certain occasion? Let me read them to you. They are found in Luke 14:28-32:

28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?

29 Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him,

30 Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.

31 Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?

So these were all good questions, but Sanballat and his friends were using like they would to stick daggers into the hearts of the Jews. The mention of "the army of Samaria" indicates that Sanballat had brought a contingent of military men from Samaria in order to further intimidate the Jews. He was trying to get as many people as he possibly could to impress the Jews that they were doing the wrong thing, and that what they were doing could not possibly succeed.

4:3 Then Tobiah derided the Jews with his words. (Read.)

Foxes were evidently very prevalent in that area, and especially in Jerusalem. In Jeremiah's day, which was several years before Nehemiah's, Jeremiah wrote this about foxes: "Because of the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it" (Lam. 5:18). So in Nehemiah's day they were all familiar with foxes. For foxes to walk on the wall, would suggest that it was unfinished, and not very high. And for a single fox to be able to knock it down would, of course, suggest that it had been put together poorly by people who did not know what they were doing. This was clearly one insult upon another with which Tobiah was showing his scorn for the Jews.

Now naturally it would be a great temptation to answer both Sanballat and Tobiah. But what did Nehemiah do? He prayed. This prayer, two verses in our Bibles, was spontaneous, I am sure that it was silent. I doubt if Nehemiah's lips moved. But he quickly, and fervently, called upon the Lord to help them. Notice that he did not ask the Lord to save them. He did not ask the Lord to change their minds. He prayed that God might judge them. This is important for us to see and to understand.

In the first place, Nehemiah knew that they were doing the will of God. Secondly, he knew that Sanballat and Tobiah were opposing the will of God in even ridiculing the Jews and the work that they were doing. This opposition had continued for some time. It was obvious that they had no intention whatsoever of stopping, and so Nehemiah prayed that they might be stopped. And what was probably the most important point, Nehemiah knew that God Himself had been stirred to anger by what these men were doing. It will often help us and strengthen our faith if we, in the midst of such opposition as this, will stop and reflect upon what might be the mind of the Lord in the situation that we face.

I am sure that we cannot sense the gratitude to God that filled the hearts of the Jewish people at this moment in their lives when they were back in their homeland. They wanted to see the presence of God restored and protected. This is what they had been without, some of them, for almost a lifetime. Many had been born in captivity and had never known any degree of freedom before. Nehemiah prayed that his enemies would know the trials and sorrows of life and captivity. But this was only the first part of his brief prayer. The second part follows in verse 5.

4:5 Sanballat and Tobias and men like them were not ignorant of God. Nor were they ignorant that the Jews had been in captivity for their own sin. Now they were back. The Temple has just been rebuilt a few years before, and now they were to rebuild the walls of the city. They were a people recovering for years under the judgment of God. They (meaning the nation) had been taken away because they had displeased. The Lord had made it clear that they were to rebuild the walls. The coming of Nehemiah was evidence of that. Now they were just as concerned about displeasing God by not doing what He had commanded them to do as they had been by displeasing Him in positive ways.

The prayer of Nehemiah sounds severe, and it is! But here was a man who was totally committed to doing the will of God, and he would not tolerate anything that stood in the way. But only God could keep the door open for them to do His will. And Nehemiah knew that it might take strong measures on God's part to make doing the will of God for the Jews a possibility.

Nehemiah was a man who, knowing the will of God, would not let anyone or anything stand in his way. But he knew that his greatest appeal was to the Lord in prayer. Although Nehemiah's prayer was short, it was to the point as he appealed to the Lord to help him.

The lesson is clear for us. We have access all of the time to a wise, loving, and almighty God. Let us not try to struggle in our own strength which can only be done in His.

4:6 So the work continued. At this point it was half done. That could mean that the full wall was half done, and that all of it was only half as high as the wall was intended to be. The work was not yet finished,

and it would not be finished unless they continued to work. So they continued because, as we read here, “the people had a mind to work.”

“So they built the wall,” *i.e., continued to build the wall*. Dr. Kidner makes this comment on those few words: The sturdy simplicity of that statement, and of the behavior it records, makes Sanballat and his friends suddenly appear rather small and shrill, dwarfed by the faith, unity and energy of *the weak* (italics mine, p. 91).

4:7 The list of peoples from many groups who were allied with Sanballat continued to grow. (Read.) “And they were very wroth.” Not only did the number of their enemies increase, but so did the anger of each one of them which was accompanied by the growing intention of stopping the Jews. So what did they do? Verse 8 tells us.

4:8 All of the people mentioned in verse 7 were haters of the Jews. So at Sanballat’s request, they formed an alliance against Israel for the purpose of making war against Jerusalem to “hinder” the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s wall. This was a League of Nations, or a United Nations, determined to exterminate Israel. See Psalm 83 for a similar situation. Humanly speaking there was no hope for the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem. They were outnumbered, and so doomed – or so their enemies planned. The Jews had only one hope, and that was in God. So what did they do?

They knew very well the story of when some of these same nations came against Judah in the days of Jehoshaphat. You will find this story in 2 Chronicles 20. (If time permits, read this chapter at least down to verse 30.) And so they did what Jehoshaphat did. They prayed, and they kept working, and posted a heavy guard.

4:9 “Nevertheless we made our prayer unto God.” Notice Nehemiah did not write what *he* did, but what “we” did. The people were not only with him in doing the work that God had called Nehemiah to do, but they were with him in his dependence upon which they expressed in prayer. But not only did they pray, but they set a lookout for the enemy day and night while the work continued. The one did not exclude the need for the other. God was at work in answer to prayer and also in the guard that was on duty. But notice which came first.

Now the Jews had no way of telling when their enemy would strike, and so we know that they did not have time to get together to pray, not to set aside even a whole day to prayer. So while there may have been some who for a short time got together for prayer, it seems that they became a nation of individuals who gave themselves to prayer, ejaculatory prayer, prayer “on the run” so to speak, praying without ceasing, praying always. This had to be one of those high moments in the history of Israel. May we learn from their example to live always thinking about the Lord, remembering Him, and briefly, but often, calling upon God for His blessing. This was a case where their praying leader by the blessing of God produced a praying people.

4:10 But at this time a problem was discovered among the people themselves. Many of the people who were then living in Judah were feeling the strain of the work coupled with the threat of those who were trying

to stop what they were doing. There was so much work to be done, and it looked endless and hopeless to many who had given themselves to accomplish what the Lord had given them to do. As we often sing, “the arm of flesh will fail you, you dare not trust your own.” They had so much work to do in clearing away all of the debris, that the task looked like they would never finish the job of building the wall. They could not get to the work that they had set out to do. It was much larger than they thought that it would be. And now their enemies were making the work look even more impossible. And they were well aware of what we are told in the next verse.

4:11 At the same time that the people were confronted with what was actually an impossible situation for them, their enemies had their strategy all planned. The Jews knew that their enemies were so determined to stop them that they were prepared to kill them if that is what it would take. but there was no way for the Jews to know *when* or *how* their enemies would attack. The situation could not have appeared to have been worse in the eyes of the Jews. And the situation was every bit as bad as it appeared to be. Even in their captivity they had felt more secure than they did at this moment, although they were back in Jerusalem.

March 1, 2010

It is interesting to contrast in verse 10 the words, “And Judah said,” with the first words in verse 11 which said, “And our adversaries said.”

4:12 But verse 12 contains a message which was given to them “ten times,” meaning over and over by more than one person, that Sanballat and the enemies of the Jews were planning an attack on the Jews in Jerusalem who were building the wall. We see in this a providential act of the Lord to protect His people, and to encourage them to keep working.

4:13 So the Sanballat’s secret was made known and he could not make a surprise attack. But Nehemiah, sensing that this could mean discouragement to his people, took immediate action, and armed the workers with swords, spears, and bows. And the workers continued their work regardless of where they were working, on the high places, or the low. Those in high places would be better able to see their enemies, and so warn the rest of the people. But, in addition, he spoke to the people as we learn in verse 14.

4:14 Nehemiah may have detected some fear among the people, and so he spoke to them encouraging them not to forget the Lord. Perhaps you remember that Moses told the children of Israel before he died that they would have to guard against forgetting the Lord when they got into the Promised Land. One such passage is found in Deuteronomy 6:10-13:

10 And it shall be, when the Lord thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not,

11 And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full;

12 Then beware lest thou forget the Lord, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

13 Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name.

Practically the same words are give two chapters later, particularly in Deuteronomy 8:11.

Here in verse 14 Nehemiah mentioned two characteristics of the Lord that he wanted the people to remember, His greatness and that He is a “terrible” God. Obviously “terrible” must have meant something different in Nehemiah’s day from what its primary meaning is today. But let’s take “great” first.

Obviously Nehemiah was telling his fellow Jews that the Lord was great enough to take care of Israel's enemies, either by overcoming their opposition, as He did in the case of the Pharaoh in Egypt in the days of Moses, or as He had done in their own day in moving upon the hearts of Darius and Cyrus and Artaxerxes, just to mention three of the Persian kings. Also God was great enough to lead the children of Israel through all kinds of difficulties in leading them from Egypt to the Promised Land. He gave them manna every day. He provided quail for them. He gave them water out of a rocky cliff which had no sign of water. The list could go on and on. The Lord is not only great, but He is the greatest. There is no one greater than He. God is a great God, and He never gives anything but great blessings.

But what did Nehemiah mean when He called God "terrible"? It is a word which is capable of two meanings. One is that the Lord is a God to be feared. That is what Sanballat and all of cronies needed to remember. There are plenty of examples in Israel's history of what the Lord did to those who had set themselves against either the leaders of Israel, or against the nation as a whole. The Lord's record in coming to the defense of His people, was perfect. And you can think of examples of these. But for the children of Israel this word "terrible" means that God is a God to be revered, worshiped, trusted, and obeyed.. The nation of Israel was to be known as a God-fearing nation.. They were to be fearful of grieving the Lord by their sin and unbelief (which is a form of sin). Believers and unbelievers alike are often in danger of actually forgetting Who the Lord is, that He is God!

Twice in the book of Deuteronomy which contains Moses' last words to the people of Israel before he died, and before the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, Moses told them to beware of forgetting the Lord. And this God's people always have a tendency to do. Even the Lord's Supper was designed to help us remember our Lord, and to remember Him especially with reference to His death. We need to remember the Lord every day, and all through every day. One thing we do in connection with those we love, is to remember them. When we are away, we think about them. A wife, or a husband, may ask the other when they have been apart, "Did you think about me today?" How important it is that we remember the Lord! We would save ourselves a lot of needless worry if we were faster in turning our thoughts and prayers to the Lord. I am not saying that we never worry because we do. But we should be quicker than we usually are in remembering the Lord when anything troubles us. Sanballat and his buddies did not have this privilege. They could only think of themselves and each other. Nehemiah did not minimize the possibility of trouble, but he was remembering the Lord! *Our God is truly awesome, and the better we know Him, the more we realize how awesome He is!*

But notice! Remembering the Lord did not exclude them from the possibility that they might have to fight! And he mentioned four groups that they needed to fight for – the Jewish people (or it could mean their brothers and sisters, and parents if they were still living, their sons, their daughters. And then he added, their houses, meaning their homes. You see, when we remember the Lord, we are doing what Nehemiah was doing, we not only help ourselves and those who are near and dear to us, but we encourage them to do the same. And if any of our loved ones don't know the Lord, the trouble may be what God is using to turn them unto Himself. So if we remember the Lord, we are going to be helping others to do the same.

4:15 Here we are reminded that the prayer mentioned in verses 4 and 5, and the prayers offered in verse 9, were answered! Derek Kidner said about this verse, "Now the temporary lull is accepted for what it is: a chance to start building again, but not to disarm" (p. 93). And there are a couple of good lessons for us in this verse. The need to keep working and to keep praying, will never end in this life, and neither does the need to keep on the whole armor of God. We have a full armor to put on, and to keep on. We need "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17). But both defensively and offensively we need to be praying all of the time with all kinds of prayer – petition, intercession, thanksgiving, worship, and confession – not necessarily in that order, but including all of them daily, and at times, hourly. This chapter in Nehemiah gives us a

lot of help in what it means to be a Christian. The Devil hates any and everything that is going to glorify God, and so he is going to oppose it. But the victory is already ours in Christ. It was won for us by our Savior on the Cross, and we claim it by prayer.

This verse also indicates that God had worked in such a way that even the Jews' enemies realized that "God had brought their counsel to naught," to nothing!

Verse 15 tells us on several things that "came to pass"; now in verse 16 we read about more that "came to pass."

4:16 Keep in mind that in this chapter and to the end of this section of the book in 6:14 we have Nehemiah's personal report of all that went on during the building of the wall.

Now what happened, as Nehemiah said, "from this time forth," half of the people worked while the half stood guard. "Habergeons" were their protective armor. The dictionary explains that it is a high-necked jacket of mail. So the spiritual application of this applies to Ephesians 6:10-18. Those who stood guard were protected defensively as well as having their weapons for offensive conflict. The rulers of Judah were in full support of what Nehemiah was doing. And this is important too. In all things we need to be "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in bond of peace," as Paul exhorted the Ephesian church to do in Ephesians 4:3. Moses was always disturbed when there was evidence of disunity among the people of God. A divided nation, or a divided church, will usually become a defeated nation or church.

4:17 One writer says concerning this verse that in the case of the workers, with one hand they held a trowel, and in the other a weapon.

4:18 The weapon that the builders had was a sword. There is no conflict between verses 17 and 18 in that one said the weapon was in the hand of the builder, and the other that it was "girded by his side." There would be times when the builder would have the sword in his hand, and other times when it would be in its sheath.

At the end of this verse Nehemiah mentioned that the trumpeter was always by his side. And in verses 19 and 20 we learn what the trumpeter had to do.

4:19 Nehemiah had wisely prepared for every emergency. The people were prepared. While some were working, others stood on guard. All of them were armed. But one problem that they faced was the distance that would exist with those who were building on the wall. The enemy could easily attack one part, and others would be completely unaware of what was going on. As Nehemiah said, "We are separated upon the wall, one far from another."

4:20 And so it was planned that when they heard the trumpet, as they could have any place on the wall, they were to go to the place from which the trumpet sounded. Now Nehemiah did not have the high tech equipment that we have today, and so he must have had several men who worked with him who helped him in keeping track of any trouble from the enemy. The Word doesn't explain to us how they did. Nehemiah was not omnipresent, and so he would have needed help. But they had it all worked out. Nevertheless, with all of the preparations that had been made, Nehemiah reminded the nobles, rulers, and all of the people (see verse 19) that they were still totally dependent upon the Lord. He told all of them that "our God shall fight for us." So it may have been that the Lord sovereignly was going to keep Nehemiah informed about any activity of the enemy. But whatever the meaning might be, Nehemiah wanted to know that with all of their weapons, and with the

number of people who were there to help, all of that together was not sufficient without the Lord. We can never get along without Him. Nehemiah must have known Psalm 127 where we read in the first verse, “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.”

Nehemiah knew that the Lord had put in his heart back in Shushan to be concerned about the Jewish people and their city which was in rubble. He knew that the Lord had put in the heart of Artaxerxes a willingness to let him go to Jerusalem. He knew that the Lord had protected him and those who were with him on their journey to Jerusalem. He knew that the Lord had united the people to respond to him by saying, “Let us rise up and build.” He knew that there would be opposition, but he knew also that the Lord had led them in taking all of the precautions that they possibly could. But also, with all of that, Nehemiah knew that it was absolutely essential that they keep trusting the Lord, that all would fail without the Lord and His blessing. At every point he saw the hand of the Lord, and he knew that it would only be by the blessing, grace, and power of the Lord, that the job could be finished.

The last three verses tell us how the work progressed.

4:21 All that God had done, plus the words of encouragement from Nehemiah, had given the people the will to work, and to work until the job was finished. Everyone did as they were supposed to do.

4:22 One great concern that Nehemiah had was that someone might come within the walls at night and destroy all of the work that had been done during the day. So Nehemiah told them what to do in this verse. (Read.) One writer has said, “The danger of leaving Jerusalem an almost empty shell was a recurrent concern to Nehemiah” (Kidner, p. 94). (Read also the first four verses of chapter 7.)

4:23 This last verse of chapter 4 tells us that Nehemiah did not require of the people anything that he was not willing to do himself. And he even mentioned himself first, not in a boastful way, but to show the a true leader will lead. He and the people worked, ate, and slept in their clothes, taking the clothes off occasionally just for washing – both themselves and their clothes.

To summarize what this chapter teaches us about the Christian life and the work that the Lord has given us to do as His people, I want to adapt four points which Lange has made in his commentary linking this chapter to our lives today. He spoke of:

- 1) What this chapter takes for granted.
- 2) Of what this chapter reminds us.
- 3) What it demands.
- 4) What it promises.

It is always to get the details, the teaching, and the meaning of that which is recorded for us in Scripture. But we always need to be asking the Lord to teach us what we are reading in the Word, is to mean to us when applied to our lives today. I think these four points help us to do just that.

First, what this chapter takes for granted. It takes for granted that there is going to be conflict and opposition which we have to face in our lives as Christians, and in the work of the Lord. We learn this also from the first three chapters of Genesis. How long it was after Adam and Eve were created that the Devil appeared on the scene, we do not know, but we can be sure that it was not very long. It was before they had children. He appeared as a friend, but in fact he was an enemy, an enemy of God and of all creation. The Devil hates us because we are God’s people, and he will try everything imaginable to hinder us, to confuse us, and, if it would

not for the protective hand of God in our lives, he would destroy us. Sometimes he works from without; sometimes he works from within. But we can be sure that he is always doing something. The Bible tells us that he knows that his time is short (Rev. 12:12), and he is out to make the most of it. The Christian life is a wonderful life, but it is not an easy life. It is hard. It is warfare. We learn this from Nehemiah 4.

Secondly, this chapter reminds us that the work of the Lord is a great work. It is the greatest work on earth. I know of a Pastor who said that he would rather do the work that he is doing without pay than to be paid for doing anything else. Just think: we are preparing people for heaven and eternity. We have been called upon to preach the Gospel to every creature. We have the only message to proclaim by which people can have their sins forgiven. God has given us the privilege of spreading a message by which people can actually be transformed from sinners into saints. The hope that we as Christians have is the only hope that there is. This is the only work that will never fail because it is God's work in us and for us. We may get weary in the work, but we must never get weary of the work. Nehemiah did not run from the work before him. He got to it as fast as he could, worked tirelessly in it, and never even thought of stopping until the work was done. The Christian life is the greatest of lives, and Christian work is the greatest of all works.

Thirdly, what does the Christian life and the work of the Lord demand of us? We look at Nehemiah, and we have to answer, *everything*. This is pictured by the endless effort and vigilance that Nehemiah and the Jews had to exercise until the job was finished. It is pictured for us by the way they worked and slept in the same clothes, and only occasionally took time to bathe themselves. You and I are who reading through the Bible by the schedule that we distribute as a church, read just yesterday in Mark 8:34-37,

34 Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

35 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.

36 For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

37 Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

See also Romans 12:1-2.

Fourth and finally, what does it promise us? It promises us that "He that hath begun a good work in you, shall perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). And remember that because we know that if the Lord does not come before we die, that we have before us the hope of resurrection, guaranteed to us by the resurrection of Christ. And so we read in 1 Corinthians 15:57 and 58,

57 But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

All of these four points are illustrations to us today that we can surely follow the example of Nehemiah who serve the Lord in his generation, knowing that the God Who blessed him, and used him, is the same God Who will bless us and use us in our generation. We won't build any city walls, but He will fill our hands and bless us if we walk with Him like Nehemiah did.

March 8, 2010

Chapters 5 and 6, down to verse 14, are a continuation of chapter 4. This entire section comes under the following points in our outline:

- I. The rebuilding of the walls in Jerusalem (Neh. 1-6).
 - D. Opposition to the work (Neh. 4:1-6::14).

The problem threefold:

- 1) A “dearth,” or famine (v.3b). This was natural, and, of course, brought on by God Himself.
- 2) Taxation (v. 4). This was internal. Much of this may have been for the expenses of the wall, but primarily it seems to have been for the support of the new government.
- 3) Although this is not mentioned, it is reasonable to think that the work of rebuilding the wall was itself had taken a big toll physically.

5:1 This would be a good chapter for President Obama to read. Nehemiah would be a good leader for the President to consult.

The people had started out the work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem with great enthusiasm, but as chapter 5 open there is evidence of great unhappiness. And it was basically against their leaders, and here they are designated as “the Jews.” In the Gospels we find this term is also used for the Jewish leaders. They are identified in verse seven where “the nobles, and the rulers” are mentioned. In verse 12 we see that “the priests” were a part of that group. All of these were the ones who had imposed, or *exacted*, taxes upon the people. “A great cry” suggests that the former enthusiasm for the work was gone. Even as we learned from chapter 4, the burden of defending themselves may have been a price they had to pay physically that they had not counted on.

We know that the Lord burdened Nehemiah for Jerusalem and its citizens, and that the Lord had led step by step in his return to Jerusalem, and the people’s original acceptance of the proposal that Nehemiah had made to them, but this did not mean that there would be no problems, or that everything would run smoothly throughout the project. The people, of course, could not have anticipated the difficulties they would face, and so as they began to come, and to increase, the people had reached the limit of their endurance. Problems can mean that some action by the Lord’s people was not the will of God, but that was not the case here. The evidence strongly supported what they were doing. Nevertheless, there was trouble within the nation. Even the wives were involved in the outcry. We see why in verses 2 and 5. It was because their children were suffering.

You will remember that in the early Church things went amazingly well at the beginning, but then they had opposition from “the Jews,” and trouble arose from within the Church because “there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations” (Acts 6:1). But, fortunately, in both cases the Lord had wise leaders who knew what to do to solve the problems.

5:2 Children were evidently a large segment of the population in those days, and the parents were doing all that they could to provide for their families – a burden which rested to a large extent on the women. The situation was so bad that the families faced the situation that many could starve to death.

5:3 Now at the end of this verse we see that the situation of the people was further complicated by a “dearth,” or a famine. Now we can say that a famine was either caused or permitted by the Lord. He is sovereign even over the weather. God had some purpose in this addition to the needs of His people, and we soon learn that it was because the Jews were charging interest when they provided money for the people so that they and their children could eat. Now this was directly in violation of the will of God as we learn, for example, from Exodus 22:25:

25 If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shalt thou lay upon him usury.

Now usury is not just charging interest, but it is “the lending of money at an excessive or unlawfully high rate

of interest” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, p.817). So the Jewish leaders were stuffing their own pockets with the money of the people.

Times of trouble are always a time for us to search our hearts in the presence of the Lord to see if there is any way, or any ways, in which what we are doing, or not doing, is displeasing to the Lord. There was a very big reason in what the Jewish leaders were doing. People were working hard doing the will of God, but they were not being treated right by their leaders. Their leaders saw that it was an opportunity to make some money, and a lot of it.

Now the first thing that we ought to recognize in this situation was that this show a great lack of love on the part of the leaders for the people. Yesterday in our NT reading in Mark 12 we had the account of where a Jewish scribe asked our Lord what the first commandment in the Law. By this he meant the greatest commandment, or that which gave meaning to all of the other commandments. And, as you know, the Lord responded by not using one of the ten commandments, which the scribe might have expected, but He mentioned Deuteronomy 6:5, which was repeated by our Lord as recorded in Mark 12:30:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.

And then, without pausing, the Lord went on to say this as recorded in Mark 12:31:

And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

To which our Lord immediately added, “There is none other commandment greater than these.”

Now the Lord was saying that you can’t have the one without having the other. If you don’t have the second, it is because you don’t have the first. People can say that they love the Lord, that they are Christians, but they may tell you, “But I don’t go to church.” That is one way of telling you that they don’t love to be with the people of God or they are the very people that they would want to know, and to be with, the very people among which they find their best friends.

You see, just because “the Jews” were recognized as the leaders of the Jews, did not mean that they were true children of God. Do you remember what we have learned from the last two verses of Romans 2? Let me remind you what they tell us:

28 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:

29 But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God (Rom. 2:28-29).

Just because a person is a Jew by birth, does not mean that he is a child of God. God makes us His children inwardly, and that is what makes us live as the people of God outwardly. It is not our original birth that is the most important; it is when we are born again. People may be praised by men because outwardly they usually act like a Christian, but if you don’t love the people of God it is probably because you don’t really know God, or love Him.

So those Jewish leaders who were taken their fellow Jews for all that they could get out of them, probably were not what they claimed to be. I am sure that this did not include all of the Jews. Nehemiah was one of them. But our text tells us that he was “very angry” when he learned what the Jews were doing to the people.

5:4 Nehemiah is telling us in these verses what was going on. And so here he revealed that he had found out, as he said in verse 3, that they had taken out mortgages on their lands and vineyards in order to pay “the tribute,” or taxes, which they were forced to pay. So they were in danger of losing their homes and their livelihood. Kidner says that such people were “all but doomed” (p. 95). It certainly sounds like today, doesn’t

it? Instead of helping the people in their needs, that made matters worse for them. *This is not love!*

5:5 But all that had happened up to this point, was not the worst. The worst was that it had made their children virtual slaves. As a result of all that had taken place up to this point, their children were put into bondage. It was like losing their children. Their brethren took their children so that they actually became like this did not belong to them anymore, but to their brethren. It was especially painful to the parents that some of their daughters not only became servants (evidently voluntarily), but bond servants, meaning that it would take money to get them back, but not even that until the year of jubilee. And the parents would not have had the money to redeem them.

Keil points out that the expression, “neither is it in our power to redeem them,” was an expression that was used in those days to mean “our hand is not to God,” *i.e.*, the power to alter it is not in our hand “ (p. 210). It was used by Laban when he pursued Jacob who had left with his family without letting his father-in-law know that he was going. He said,

29 It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt: but the God of your father spake unto me yesternight, saying, Take thou heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad (Gen. 31:29).

God had taken the power out of Laban’s hand to hurt him, but in the case of the Jewish parents in Nehemiah’s day, that Lord had not given the parents that power over their enemies. But, to the glory of God, we see in the following verses that the power that the parents did not have, was a power that God exercised in another way to meet the needs of their daughters.

In the story of Esther you will remember how Haman hated Mordecai because he would not bow down before him, when Haman found out that Mordecai was a Jew, he was able to get King Ahasuerus to send out letters to all of his provinces declaring that on a certain day all of the Jews in his kingdom would be killed. Esther, who had been raised by Mordecai and was like a daughter to him, had been chosen by King Ahasuerus to be his Queen. And Mordecai spoke to Esther of going before the King to plead for the safety of the Jews. Now no one, including the Queen, was to go into the King without being called or he or she might be put to death. But in speaking to Esther, Mordecai said to her that if she held her peace and kept quiet about it, “then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place” (Esther 4:14). And in doing so Mordecai gave expression to a great truth having to do with the ways of the Lord. Mordecai knew that God had promised the Jewish people a Savior and a King and a kingdom. And he also knew that God was a God Who would keep every promise He had ever made. And so he knew that if Esther did not plead for the deliverance of her people, God would raise up help and deliverance for the Jews from another place.

Now take the divine principle and apply it to the children, especially the daughters of the Jewish people who had become bond slaves. Their parents were not able to help them. But that did not mean that they were helpless. It simply meant that God was going to use someone else or some other measures, to come to the aid of His people. And Nehemiah was to be that person.

When we face problems that we cannot handle, and we don’t know anyone else who can help us, let us remember that God will not fail us. He will meet our needs in His own way which may never have occurred to us. This is a good illustration of a verse that many of us have been memorizing: “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.” Those Jewish parents did not want to leave their daughters, but they were helpless to do anything else. But God had Nehemiah, and he was to be the deliverer of those daughters. Remember that when we run out of ideas, the Lord already knows what He is going to do, and He will not fail us. He *cannot* fail because He is God, a faithful God. Those helpless parents were themselves the children of a mighty God!

March 9, 2010

5:6 Nehemiah was shocked, and his shock turned to anger. When the Lord entered the synagogue and saw a man with a withered hand, He was not shocked, but He became angry at the hardness of heart that was displayed by the Pharisees when they watched Him to see if He would heal the man's hand on the Sabbath Day. There are times when it is wrong not to be angry. Nehemiah' anger was motivated for the glory of God and for the blessing of the people of God. He was angry because "the Jews" had taken the difficult situation that the Lord's people faced as an opportunity for their own gain. Now the Lord never let His anger even remotely turn into sin. He was absolutely incapable of sin. But we have to be careful. Paul told the Ephesian believers that "we are members members one of another" (Eph. 4:23), and so when we are angry we must not let our anger turn into sin. His words were, as found in Ephesians 4:26-27,

26 Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:

27 Neither give place to the devil.

For us anger can quickly turn into sin, and so we give the Devil an opportunity to take advantage of the way we have mishandled a bad situation.

So what did Nehemiah do?

5:7 The first thing that he did was to consult with himself. That is, before he talked to the leaders of the people, he talked to himself. A different word is used in Proverbs 16:32 is different from the word that Nehemiah used here in 5:7, but the idea is certainly the same:

32 He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city (Prov. 16:32).

So, while he was "very angry" with the Jewish leaders, "the nobles, and the rulers," he did not let his anger get out-of-control. But he did rebuke them, and said, in effect, "How could you do this to your brothers?" If we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, *i.e.*, which means to look out for the welfare of others just like we look out for our own welfare, then the action of the nobles and rulers (and others, as we shall learn later), was in direct violation of the will of God. And so Nehemiah acted immediately to correct the situation. And we are told in verses 8, 9, and 10 what he said unto them. But Nehemiah closed verse 7 by saying that he got others from the people to stand with him against the leaders. With all that Nehemiah did, and all that he said, we have evidence that he exercised great wisdom in handling the problem, not just to show the people how angry he was, but to take steps to correct the wrong doing.

Now the main problem was not that the leaders had loaned the money to the people, but that they had actually set themselves up as money-lenders, and had pursued to people to take the money so that they could charge the people with interest and make a profit, and probably an exorbitant profit, for themselves. Remember that usury by definition is not just lending money, but lending it at an excessive and unlawful rate of interest.

5:8 Here Nehemiah continues to tell us what he said to the leaders who had sinned so greatly against God, and against His people.

One of the amazing parts of what the Jews had done to their own people was that they were bringing their own people back into bondage to themselves the people who had been in bondage to the Babylonians and to the Perians. A similar situation arose with the Lord and His disciples when they were on their way to Jerusalem and had to pass through Samaria where the Samaritans rejected them because they were on their way to Jerusalem. Let me read to you what James and John wanted to do to the Samaritans according to Luke 9:54-56:

54 And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?

55 But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.

56 For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And they went to another village.

When Nehemiah said this, the guilty Jewish leaders had no answer.

5:9 Here Nehemiah brought the offenders to the main issue. In doing what they had done, they were not walking in the fear of the Lord. They were so possessed with the opportunity to make a lot of money for themselves that they had completely failed to consider whether or not it was pleasing to God. Just because they had been able to do what they had done, was no evidence that it was right when it was in direction violation of the revealed will of God. Again let me remind all of us what Solomon said in the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 1:7 we read:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

And then in Proverbs 9:10 we read:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy (One) is understanding. To fear the Lord is to ask always, "Is what I am about to do pleasing, or displeasing, to the Lord? And the answer to that question is not in what others are doing, and seem to be getting away with it, *but in what does God say about this in His Word.* Remember it is the Word of God that is "a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path" (Psa. 119:105). We all need to be like Martin Luther who said, "My heart is captive to the Word of God." It is the Word of God which determines what is right as compared with what is wrong. That which pleases God is right; what displeases Him is sin, and so it is wrong. Nehemiah knew that they had enough to do to contend with their enemies, so why should they add to that their sin? The price of disobedience is too great, and only a fool would risk the result of disobeying God. The attitude of many Americans today is *if you can do it, do it!* And that basically is why we are in the mess we are in today. "The wages of sin is death."

So basically, to walk in the fear of God means to walk in obedience to His Word, and to give priority to the Word over every other influence that we have in our lives. The fear of God is first and always to be seen in the place that we give to the Word of God in our lives. And this obedience must not be a reluctant or resentful obedience, but with joy and thanksgiving to the Lord that He has given us His Word, and that He has given us the Holy Spirit to incline us and to empower us to do what is pleasing to the Lord. So when Nehemiah raised the subject of the fear of God, he was pointing the main issue in the life of every child of God. And this applies to today just as much as it did in Nehemiah's day.

5:10 Nehemiah admitted that he and his brothers and his servants could take money and food away from the people, but he pled with the rulers and nobles to stop what they were doing immediately. And even Nehemiah and some of his brethren and servants had to admit that they had some things to make right even though they had not been involved in what the other leaders had done. When we are dealing with the sins of others, it is always good to examine our own hearts to make sure that there is no sin in us.

If you have not read Jerry Bridges' book, "The Joy of Fearing God," you need to do so. John Bunyan also wrote a book which is simply called, "The Fear of God," which is worth its weight in gold. This was a subject very dear to the Puritans and a subject of major importance as it should be with all of us.

But that was only a part of what they were to do. The second part is in verse 11.

5:11 Nehemiah wanted the leaders to give back to the people everything that they had taken away. This meant giving back to the people their land, their vineyards and oliveyards, and their houses. But this was not all! *They were to give back to the people 100% of all of the money, corn, wine, and oil that they had taken away from the people.* We can't always undo the sin that we have committed, but this was one time when the

leaders could. And so they were to do it, and to do it immediately! This was a big order, an amazingly big order, but Nehemiah gave them no other alternative.

How did the leaders respond? We are told in verse 12.

5:12 Their answer is in the first part of this verse. (Read.) There was evidently not a single dissenter! But it seems that Nehemiah had found out that the priests were involved in some way, and so he made them promise to do what the others had said that they would do.

5:13 But then Nehemiah did one final thing as a sort of seal before God and the people that they all were examining their own hearts to find anything that was not pleasing to the Lord, lifting up his garment as though he was carrying all their sin, and shaking it out as an indication that they were casting off their sins with no intention of ever going back to them again. It was symbolic, but it was very meaningful.

What was the response of the people to Nehemiah's action? The last part of this verse gives us our answer. (Read verse 13b.)

Now let me ask you a question. Why did they praise the Lord? I believe we find the answer in the NT spelled out in words which we all can understand. Please turn with me to 2 Timothy 2:24. I want to read to you verses 24 through 26, the three verses at the end of 2 Timothy 2. Follow in your Bible as I read 2 Timothy 2:24-26:

24 And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,
 25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them
 repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;
 26 And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at
 his will.

Here is the answer to my question. They praised the Lord for their repentant hearts because they knew that their repentance did not originate with them, but it was God Who had given it to them. You see, people not only need to be repentant when they first come to Christ, but we as believers, like the Jews we have read about in ancient Jerusalem, needed to be repentant of their sins as the people of God. God gave Nehemiah the courage and the wisdom to attack this problem as he did, and God was the One Who made the people responsive and repentant to what Nehemiah had, under the blessing of the Lord, asked them to do what they so quickly and willingly did. But the people praised the Lord because God had worked "in them to will and to do according to His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). So to God alone belonged the praise of the people.

This was a time of revival in Israel, and to God all of the glory was due – not to Nehemiah, and not to the people, but to God!

March 15, 2010

5:14 For the first time here we learn that Artaxerxes had appointed Nehemiah as the Governor of Israel, which shows the high regard that the King had for Nehemiah. And with that position there were special benefits which were to be provided by the people. When Nehemiah wrote verse 14 he had held that position for twelve years (Kidner says, "from 445 to 433 B.C.") and yet during that time he and his staff (so to speak) had never taken advantage of that privilege. This showed that Nehemiah was willing to forego this privilege to show his love for God, his gratitude to King Artaxerxes for the confidence the King had placed upon him in giving him that position, and, in a very real sense, his love for the people. Nehemiah proved that he was not in the position he was in "for the money," but to see the walls rebuilt because he knew that was why the Lord had brought him back to Jerusalem. He had rebuked the Jews because they were not walking "in the fear of God"

(v. 9), and here in verse 14 we see that he was practicing what he preached. Nehemiah was showing in his concern for the people that he was a true leader.

5:15 The former governors had not been kind to the people like Nehemiah was, but they had taxed the people so that they were under the burden that Nehemiah found them when he came. At first they could handle it, but more and more was required until it worked a great hardship on the people. They took advantage of “the bread of the governor,” *i.e.*, the taxation that their leaders had imposed upon them plus the support of the governor. The “forty shekels of silver” which is mentioned here is thought by several expositors to have been the amount paid to the governor by the Persian government. But Nehemiah did not use that amount for himself, but put it right into the expenses of the work.

The reason for the difference between Nehemiah’s governorship, and the previous governor’s, was because, as Nehemiah said in this verse, “because of the fear of God.” That is, Nehemiah’s concern was that he would do the will of God and be happy about it, whereas it seems that the previous governors were more concerned about their own personal gain.

This is a most important point which was characteristic of Nehemiah, not only as governor, but of his own personal life. Nehemiah did not say this is criticism of the former governors because what they did was legal. But he said this to express his belief that there are times when you can do what is lawful, but you don’t do it because in the present circumstances it would not be right.

The Apostle Paul got into this subject in 1 Corinthians 9 where he explained why he did not charge the people to whom he went to preach the Gospel. The way the Lord usually provides for His servants was illustrated by Paul by the fact that when they were grinding corn they were not to muzzle the ox, but let him eat of the corn. I encourage you to read 1 Corinthians 9 to see Paul’s teaching on this subject. I know that Paul wrote under the direction of the Spirit of God, but he was expressing his own conviction as well. In verse 14 of 1 Corinthians 9 Paul stated the usual will of God for those who preach the Gospel. They were to “live of the Gospel.” That is, they were to be supported by the people of God. But he expressed his conviction in that case in verses 18 and 19 in 1 Corinthians 9:

18 What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel.

19 For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more (1 Cor. 9:18-19).

So, in the same way, what Nehemiah had a perfect right to do, he refused to do because he wanted to lighten the terrible burden that the people were under because they had paid, and paid, and paid, until they had nothing left.

The “forty shekels of silver” was the amount designated for “the bread of the governor,” that is, as his salary, as we would describe it. The former governors had this besides all that they had taken from the people in taxation which probably was used for the building of the walls. But Nehemiah knew that it was not right to burden the people the way they had been burdened, and so he cut off also the money that was designated for him. See verse 18b. What a difference it makes in leaders if they lead “in the fear of God.”

Already Nehemiah had commanded the leaders to give back all that they had taken, and not to take any more. And he had gotten a promise from the priests that they would do the same. And he had done the same. Nehemiah was really casting himself and the people upon the faithfulness of the Lord. He obviously believed that since the Lord had brought him to Jerusalem, He, the Lord, would make sure that the needs of the work would be met.

Again let me recommend some books where you will find that same spirit manifested. One is the life of George Mueller of Bristol, by A. T. Pierson. The second is the life and ministry of J. Hudson Taylor, written by his son and daughter-in-law, Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor. The third is Gold Cord, by Amy Carmichael, who founded the Dohnavur Fellowship in India. They were led to establish works in which they exercised a very unusual faith in God. Perhaps Nehemiah had something to do with the way these three founded and carried on the works that the Lord led them to establish.

5:16 In addition, Nehemiah continued to work on the wall himself, and he had his servants working on the wall also. Neither did he invest in any land. So he was fully involved in the work of rebuilding the walls of the city, and had cut back on expenses. Both of these items, plus the help given by his servants, all would have served to lessen the outcry of the people.

Prior to this you will remember that Nehemiah had gotten the leaders not only to stop taking money from the people, but had gotten them to restore the land that had been taken from the people along with their houses and vineyards and oliveyards, plus 100% of the money they had taken away. What a great step of faith this was for Nehemiah to take. But he undoubtedly believed what Hudson Taylor used to say, that “God’s work done in God’s way would never lack God’s supply.”

5:17 Now Nehemiah did this knowing that he was responsible to feed 150 of the Jews and the rulers, plus extras who came from among the Gentiles who were in the area. And he must have done this from the money that he received for “the bread of the governor.” And that was no small item as we learn in verse 18.

It was proof that Nehemiah believed that God would support their needs so as to truly make it a labor of love, a labor of love for God first, and the of love for the people. This story is one of the most important stories in all of the history of Israel, a story that has a lot of lessons for us.

5:18 The daily need was one ox, six sheep, several fowls (we are not told how many), and all sorts of wine. These were not alcoholic drinks, but, of course, if kept too long they could ferment and cause trouble. But the people knew how to handle it. Grape juice is one of the most nutritious of all fruit drinks. Perhaps its tendency to ferment was why every ten days they had a fresh supply. Yet in spite of the large number of people who had to be fed, Nehemiah did not require of the people “the bread of the governor” because this had been given by the people also.

5:19 Here we have as a fitting conclusion to this chapter, another of Nehemiah’s ejaculatory prayers.
(Read.)

It is clear from this that Nehemiah did not act foolishly, but he acted in faith. He knew that if we show love for the people of God, God will show His love in special ways to us. Nehemiah did not do what he did so that God would bless him, but he knew that whatever we do for each other as the people of God, He rewards us with His blessing. What blessing do you suppose Nehemiah was thinking about that the Lord would do “good” for him. Undoubtedly he must have been thinking about the work of the walls, that God would provide for them, and enable the work to be done. Nehemiah had demonstrated the goodness to the people of God. He had relieved their burden. This was a time when the outflow was extensive, and the income was zero! But Nehemiah must have known that the cattle on a thousand hills belonged to God, and that from that supply God could meet the needs of His people. The “great cry” of the people revealed the dissatisfaction of the people for their leaders. Perhaps Nehemiah was praying that the fellowship between leaders and people would be restored. Nehemiah knew that God is good, that that is His nature, and so He always does good things. It is impossible to say all that Nehemiah had in mind, but we know that he was counting heavily on God’s goodness. See also Nehemiah

13:14, 31.

I am sure that God was just as pleased with this brief, ejaculatory prayer, which Nehemiah prayed, as He had been with all of the good things that Nehemiah had done to help the Lord's people. We need to pray before we do the will of God, and then do it, and not forget to pray afterwards. Let me say again, I don't think that we can ever learn to pray without ceasing, or to pray with all prayer, all kinds of prayer, unless we learn to pray ejaculatory prayers.

March 22, 2010

Nehemiah 6:1-14

Chapters 4 and 5 tell us about problems that Nehemiah had with the people of the land against their leaders, and it was mainly due to the way they had been taxed. That got settled. Now we learn about the resumption of trouble from the outside. We run into again the names of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem.

6:1 We first met these men in chapter 2, then again in chapter 4, and now in chapter 6. Each time their method was different. They had been anti-Semitic for a long time, but their opposition to the people of Israel when Nehemiah arrived for the purpose of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, their hatred of the Jews took on a new face. They had tried ridicule along with the charge that they were building the wall to rebel against the King of Persia. But this time they tried more of a friendly approach, but their purpose was to kill Nehemiah. But Nehemiah was aware of their purposes, just as the Apostle Paul expressed himself against Satan's opposition to his own ministry, and said, "We are not ignorant of his devices" (2 Cor. 2:11).

It is good for all of us to study such passages as tell us about how the Devil tempted Adam and Eve, and how the Devil tempted our Lord, to cite two instances as to how the Devil has worked since the beginning of time. As it is with sin, so it is with the Devil, we can learn much more from about sin and the Devil, from what we are taught in the Scriptures about these enemies of ours, than we can from our own experiences, or the experiences of others. Both sin and the Devil are truly exposed in the Word of God.

At this time the wall was almost finished, but the doors had not yet set up. So now Sanballat and his cronies were ready to turn their guns on Nehemiah.

"The rest of our enemies" can be filled by those mentioned in 4:2. A part of them were Ashdodites which is import to notice when in verse 2 "the plain of Ono" is mentioned.

6:2 His enemies wanted him to meet them in "one of the villages in the plain of Ono, which was in the territory of Benjamin, completely away from Jerusalem. Obviously they had sinister motives, and Nehemiah knew it.

"The plain of Ono," while being in Benjamin's territory, was close to both Samaria and the Ashdodites, and as Kidner pointed out in his commentary, these were both sinister territories because both areas were hostile to Israel. In itself that would have been a warning not to go there since it seemed to spell trouble. It seems that Israel, including today, has always been surrounded by her enemies. This shows how hostile the world is against God and His people. It appears that, if Nehemiah had gone as Sanballat wanted him to do, he probably never would have come back! Besides, such a trip would mean a great delay in finishing the work on the wall.

6:3 Here we read Nehemiah's response to Sanballat.

6:4 Four more times Nehemiah received the same message from Sanballat. This was to put more pressure on Nehemiah to accept, but it also must have been designed to cause a division between Nehemiah and the people of Israel with whom Nehemiah was working. They may have thought that Sanballat wanted to make friends with Nehemiah, and that by Nehemiah's refusal, would have kept them from becoming friends with their enemies. Solomon said in his book of Ecclesiastes that there is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Ecc. 3:7b). This was "a time to keep silence." The request was denied for a total of five times. Israel's enemies really meant business.

6:5 Whether this meant a total of five times, or six, it seems difficult to say. But this was "an open letter" so this means that it was meant for all of the people to know, not just Nehemiah. The object for the open letter was to put more pressure on Nehemiah to meet with Sanballat so that, the people might think, that meeting with Sanballat would enable the two of them to come to a gentlemen's agreement that the opposition might stop so the people could finish their work in peace.

6:6 Here and continued in verse 7 are we given the content of the open letter. "Gashmu" is taken by all of the expositors whom I consulted as another spelling of Geshem, mentioned the first time in 2:19, one of Nehemiah's enemies.

The charge was that it was reported by the Gentile enemies of Nehemiah that the reason that Nehemiah had built the wall was so that he could become the King of the Jews. If this had been true, of course it would have meant that Nehemiah was guilty of treason, and that would have called for the death penalty in any kingdom of any importance.

But look on in verse 7.

6:7 The letter also accused Nehemiah of having appointed prophets to declare that the charge in verse 6 was true, so that this would have been taking on himself divine authority, and this also would have been a crime which was deserving of death because this would have meant that Nehemiah was claim divine authority for his plot and plan.

6:8 Nehemiah in his response to Sanballat strongly denied Sanballat's charges, and said (which was true) that Sanballat had made up the whole story himself. By the use of the word "feignest" Nehemiah was telling Sanballat had made up the whole story and that it was all a big lie. These charges deeply offended Nehemiah, this man of God, for such thoughts would never have entered his mind.

6:9 These are the words that Nehemiah spoke to his people. He said that these charges were designed to make the people afraid, and to weaken their hands in the work so that the job on the wall of Jerusalem would never be completed.

But however false these charges were, Nehemiah knew that they were capable of doing great damage to himself, and to bring about the end of their work, leaving Jerusalem with an unfinished wall.

So what did he do? He prayed. No! He did not wait for the people to pray, but quickly he prayed a prayer that was shorter than the time that it takes to tell us what he prayed. Listen to it: "Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands." This showed that Nehemiah himself had been shaken by the charges leveled against him, not because they were true, but because of the way it had shaken some of the people. It showed his humility. It showed his faith. It showed that he knew where his strength came from. And it showed that it was dependent upon him to react to those charges by giving himself to the work in such a way that all of the people would

have been encouraged to do the same. This was godly leadership. He knew what he needed to do, and for the people's sake why he needed to do it, but he also knew that it would only be by the strength that the Lord would give him, would he be able to do it. Nehemiah was a seasoned servant of the Lord, but his prayer sounded like that of a little child. Nehemiah never underestimated the damage which his enemies could do. So he didn't wait to be alone with the Lord. His people may not have known that in just a few seconds he sought help from his God. But God knew what he was doing and what he was saying, and that is what was most important. And it is written out here so that you and I will learn to do the same. It may be harder for us to learn to pray short, ejaculatory prayers, than long prayers. Both are important, but when we don't have time for long prayers, let's learn that the short one's can be just as effective.

6:10 The incident related in this verse, and which is explained in the three following verses, teaches us that one trial is quickly followed by another. After a time of special blessing, the enemy of our souls may immediately attack us in another way while we may, in a sense, have our guard down.

It has to do with a man named Shemaiah. Why Nehemiah went to his house, we do not know. It may have been that he pretended to be a prophet, and as a prophet he had a message from the Lord. What it means that he was "shut up," we cannot say for sure. One writer says that it may have been that he was fulfilling a vow that he had made to the Lord. Another said that it could have been that it was in the isolation of his home he claimed that he had received a message from the Lord for Nehemiah. That is probably the best possibility. He wanted Nehemiah to go with him into the temple, "the house of God," because his enemies were looking for him and intended to kill him, but Shemaiah told Nehemiah that he would be safe there. He said that his enemies were coming at night to kill him.

6:11 We have Nehemiah's response to him here.

Nehemiah asked him why he should flee being the man that he was. Perhaps he was speaking of himself as the governor of Jerusalem. But anyway, Nehemiah knew from Numbers 18:7 that no one could go into the Temple except the priests and Levites without paying for such an offense with physical death. So he refused to go in. However, in verse 12 we learn what was really going on.

6:12 Shemaiah had spoken to Nehemiah as a prophet who had learned from God that men were planning to kill him, and even when they would do it – at night! But somehow Nehemiah perceived that Shemaiah was not a true prophet, but a false prophet, and that he had been hired by Tobiah and Sanballat to get him to go into the Temple, into the inner part where he certainly was not allowed to go. Whether his enemies thought that God would strike him dead if he went into the inner part of the Temple, we do not know. If God would strike him dead, they wouldn't have to do it. But even if he did not die for going into the Temple, his enemies would have a serious charge to bring against him which would adversely affect his leadership, and probably put an end to it, and so stop the final stages of finishing the wall. And this is what Nehemiah said, according to verse 13, was the case.

6:13 So he was hired to make Nehemiah afraid, so he would go into the Temple, and then they would have an evil charge to bring against him before his own people. To reproach him meant that they would be able to charge him with blasphemy. Nehemiah was providentially prohibited from fear, and also from disobeying the Lord.

So, I ask again, what did he do? And again the answer is, he prayed. See verse 14.

6:14 Nehemiah addressed his prayer, not only to the one, true God, but he addressed God as "my God." And

then he mentioned several of his enemies, asking God to “think” upon them, meaning to remember them, who they were, to mark them so as to identify who they were, and to deal with them according to their works. He mentioned Tobiah, Sanballat, a prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets. Before Noadiah we could write, a *false* prophetess, and before “the rest of the prophets we could add again the word *false*. Noadiah is only mentioned one other time in the Bible, in Ezra 8:33, but in that verse he is called a son. So the only thing we know about the prophetess Noadiah, is what is mentioned here, that she was not a true prophetess, but a false prophetess, and she along with the other false prophets, along with Tobiah and Sanballat, had made it their business to cause Nehemiah to fear, to be afraid.

Keil made an interesting note about this false prophetess and the other false prophets which I would like to read to you. He said that these references should cause us to perceive:

First, that the case related here in verses 10-13 is given as only one of the chief events of this kind, and second, that false prophets were again busy in the congregation, as in the period preceding the captivity, and seeking to seduce the people [of God] from hearkening to the voice of the true prophets of God, who preached repentance and conversion as the condition of prosperity (Keil, C.F., *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, partially revised, pp. 220-221).

This is really hard to believe, or is it knowing what we are told about the human heart in Scripture. Here are people recently released from Captivity, and going back to one of the same sins that led to their captivity. We learned from Ezra that the same thing was going on with those exiles who had returned from captivity. They were again marrying foreign wives when this had been one of their sins that had caused God to send them into exile. And yet we often do the same, going back to sins that have brought us under the discipline of God before.

Notice that the Devil’s main purpose in all of the opposition that came against Nehemiah and the exiles was primarily just to cause them to fear. The Apostle Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:7, “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” God does not give us fear, but the Devil does. What does the Old Testament teach us about fear? A great deal. But let me put two verses together that ought to help all of us. **The first is** in Psalm 56:3: “What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.” **The second is** in Isaiah 12:2:

Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.

What keeps fear away? Trust. What drives fear away when it comes? Trust. I either heard a person say, or I read it in some book that traveling through life second class is, “What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee.” Traveling through life first class is, “I will trust, and not be afraid.” Most of us jump back and forth, don’t we? But we all need to strive for first class

I don’t think I have ever quoted F.D.R. - Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was not a good man, and he did a lot of damage to our country. But he said one thing that was absolutely true. He said, “We have nothing to fear, but fear.” Fear tears us down and brings in all kinds of trouble into our hearts. It drags us into sin. The way to stay away from fear, is to trust. The way to be delivered from fear when you fear, is trust. And not just trust alone, but trusting in the Lord. The Isaiah passage says it the best: “I will trust, and not be afraid: for in the Lord Jehovah is my strength and song, he also is become my salvation.” What is trust? It is faith in God, faith in Christ, faith in the Holy Spirit. And the only way to have faith in our glorious Godhead, is by having faith in the wonderfully glorious book that He has given us: our Bibles. “So then faith (or trust) cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”

(Notes on chapter 7 begin on next page.)

March 29, 2010

In our outline we come now to:

II. The registration of the people who returned under Zerubbabel (Neh. 7:1-73).

In many respects this chapter is a repetition of Ezra 2. See Nehemiah 7:5b. It seems from 7:6 that many of those who returned, went back to their own cities where their families had lived before the captivity. But now that the temple was rebuilt, and the walls also, Nehemiah was concerned about the safety of the city itself, and so a plan was devised to get some of the original group to move into Jerusalem to protect the city and the temple. And so this was the reason for the writing down of their names from the original list in Ezra 2. The differences between Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, could be explained by changes that would have taken place in between the original list and the present one. So we see again what a wise leader Nehemiah was. With enemies living “in the land,” they would do anything they could to destroy what the Lord had enabled the Jews to restore. Anti-Semitism was very much alive in those days as it always has been.

But now let us return to the story in chapter 8 of Nehemiah.

Beginning with chapter 8 and going through chapter 10 we have what I have called in the outline I have given you,

III. The revival among the Jews (Neh. 8:1-10:39).

The first point under this heading is:

A. Ezra and the reading of the Law followed by the observance of the Feast of Tabernacles (8:1-18).

Now there is a very importance divine principle which is expressed here, a principle which still applies very much in our country today. But it is a principle that is not being expressed by those in high positions in our country, nor are we hearing much about it (actually, practically nothing) from conservative commentators who have the ear of most Americans. And it is this: You can come back to the holy city where God had chosen to place His Name, build the Temple, and follow that with the building of the walls of Jerusalem, and even have a plan to guard against what enemies might do, or try to do, to the city walls, the city, and the Temple, but without a return to the Word of God, there will be no revival. The blessing that had been going on, will not continue!

We ought to be praying, as we see all of the wicked, dishonest, and unlawful things that are going on, that the Lord would raise up those who would call our nation back to the Lord. Actually there would be a lot of opposition to such an idea from within our country. Remember, as we have been learning from our study of the book of Romans that being a Jew, does not make anyone a child of God. Also being an American does not make you a Christian. There is no church on the face of the earth that by joining you can become a child of the living God. You can't earn it by good works. You cannot buy it with money. It is true today, and it has always been true, that the only way you can become a child of God is by grace through faith in Christ Who died for our salvation. Every person who has ever lived (with our Lord Jesus the only exception), has been a sinner, born under the judgment of God. Only Christ can deliver us from eternal judgment.

So what we read about in Nehemiah 8 is truly amazing. It looked like total submission to God as Ezra read the

Word of God. It must have been a wonderful sight to see, and we can thank God for what happened. This was truly an amazing work that God did, but with many of them it did not last. It was not God's fault that it didn't last, but it was to be charged against the people who did not really know the true condition of their hearts. Today people hide behind rituals and ceremonies and memberships, but the only One Who can change the human heart permanently is God, and He does it through the Gospel.

Now what do we learn from verse 1?

8:1 It seems to have arisen from the people themselves that they requested that Ezra (whom we meet for the first time here in the book of Nehemiah, but with whom we became well acquainted in the book which bears his name), should bring out "the book of the law of Moses, evidently that he might read it to the people. They did not have Bibles for everyone in those days, so most people learned about what was in the Word as it was read to them. Notice that Ezra is called here in verse 1, "the scribe." In verse 9 of this chapter he is called "the priest the scribe." This means that he was the main teacher of the Jews in those days, and that much of his time was devoted to making copies of parts of God's Law, or, we would say, "of God's Word." As I mentioned in our study of Ezra, it seems that in those days, the Jewish people had all of the OT, and that Ezra is believed to have been the one who first assembled the OT Scriptures.

But I want you to notice that the people asked for the Word. That is very unusual in our day. Many people who go to church think that the teaching of the Word is boring. They have actually been taught to look for entertainment, not the teaching of the Word. It is only rarely that you see a large church that does not give way to music, contemporary music. But just have the teaching of the Word, and then just to sing hymns, are not what people are looking for today. We need to pray today that the Lord will give people in the churches of America a real hunger to hear the Word.

Ezra was probably an old man at this time. This would seem to be why we are not told about what he did in rebuilding the walls. He may have been too old for that kind of hard work. There are those who think that Ezra may have returned to Persia after the Temple was rebuilt, and that he had come back with Nehemiah. However, this is merely conjecture because there is nothing in either of these books to indicate that. However, while he may have been too old to work, he was not too old to read the Word to the people. In fact, there was nothing that he was more pleased to do than to read it, and then to explain it.

He gave the pattern for ministering the Word by what he wrote about himself in Ezra 7:10:

10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

Ezra didn't have the time to prepare for what the people wanted him to do, but that was not a problem because he was always prepared. He was a man who lived in the Word, and so when he was called on by the people, he was ready. Many times preachers and teachers of the Word will have their notes all prepared, but they have not taken the time to prepare their hearts. Ezra did that every day, so there must have been great power experienced by the people as he read the Word of God to them.

Actually readiness is a good word for all of us. I would encourage you to do what Peter told believers to do in 1 Peter 3:15:

15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.

Notice that Peter also mentioned the heart first. Perhaps if there were more readiness in us, people would be asking us to read the Word to them, and then to explain what it means.

It is worth noting that up to chapter 8 Nehemiah was speaking in the first person. From 8:1 on to 12:27 when

again he spoke in the first person. He actually first mentioned himself again in 12:31.

8:2 Ezra complied with the request of the people. And here is another important point regarding the ministry of the Word. He brought a copy of the Law. Of course that was necessary if he was going to read from it, but it is important when we minister the Word, to have a copy of the Word of God either before us on the pulpit, or in our hands. Ezra would have been reading, not from a book like ours, but from a scroll. And both men and women were before him, plus “all who could hear with understanding.” This would mean that young people, and even children were there to hear the reading of the Word – perhaps not small children because they could be a distraction for the people around them by an noise or commotion that they might make. However we know from the Law itself, that it did command that the Word of God be taught to the children. See Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord:

5 And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

6 And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:

7 And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

8 And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.

9 And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

Nehemiah 6:15 tells us that the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, which was the sixth month of the year, and this assembly gathered together on the first day of the seventh month. So there was no time lost between the completion of the work and this great assembly afterwards.

So what did Ezra do?

8:3 He read the Word in the street that went by the Water Gate “from morning until midday.” This means for at least three hours, and maybe four. The Hebrew gives the idea that it was from the dawn of the morning, that is, at the break of day when Ezra could easily see to read. And we are told that the people were not bored with what they heard but that “the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.” What a sight that must have been. Can you imagine anything like that taking place today? And I am sure that Ezra did not try to use a lot of dramatics as he read. The people could tell that he really believed what he was reading, and he handled what he read as a person should have who believed that it was God’s Word. Ezra was not seeking to impress the people with how he read the Word, but he was seeking to impress them that what he was reading was truly the Word of God – and you know that there is a difference!

But there is more to learn about Ezra’s reading that day.

8:4 He stood on a platform that had been constructed for this very purpose. We know that it was a rather large platform because on his right hand were there were six men standing with him, and on his left hand there were seven more men standing with him as he read. This meant that these men were there to show their full support for what Ezra was doing. Verse 8 says that “they (pl.) read in the book of the Law,” so it probably means that Ezra himself did not read all morning long, but that these men each took turns in reading. Later in the synagogues this was the way that the reading was done, not just by one man, but by several. Notice that “Zechariah” is mentioned in the second list. This probably was not the prophet Zechariah, but in 12:41 we read about a Zechariah was a priest, and this has led some commentators to say that the thirteen men were all priests. Why there were thirteen, we do not know. But there is still more that we are told.

8:5 As Ezra began to unroll the scroll, an amazing thing happened. “All of the people stood up.” And I

believe that we are to understand that they stood up and kept standing all the time the Law was read. No one told them to do this. It seems to have been a spontaneous reaction on the part of the people to show their reverence for the Word of God.

8:6 Before Ezra read, he prayed. “He blessed the Lord, the great God.” Prayer showed their reverence for “the Lord, the great God” Who had given the Word to them. To bless the Lord is to worship Him, to express adoration for Him. They were to love the Lord with all of our heart and soul and might, as it is said in Deuteronomy 6:5. The Lord wants His people to come to Him in prayer, but not just as a formality, or duty, or ritual, but because they loved Him, and were delighted to have fellowship with Him, and were grateful for all of His many blessing upon them. Ezra recognized the greatness of God, His sovereignty, His goodness, and the abundance of His blessings.

The people responded by saying, “Amen, Amen.” Then they lifted up their hands to the Lord, and bowed their heads, worshiping the Lord, and falling down “with their faces to the ground.” This showed humility and reverence for their great God Who was so far above them in every way that they felt themselves unworthy to come before the Lord even as Ezra prayed. We are not told what Ezra said. It probably was not a long prayer, but the hearts of the people were profoundly moved as Ezra prayed before the reading the Word began. This was one of those times when Ezra and the people before him were moved to the depths of their hearts as with Ezra they came before the Lord, their great God. How tragic that they did not always approach the Lord in this way.

8:7 The men mentioned before in verse 4 were readers; the men mentioned here were interpreters. There are thirteen mentioned by name, and then many Levites moved among the people explaining the meaning of what was being read. They “caused the people to understand the law.” And, as the reading started, the people stood again.

It is not really clear how the reading and the interpreting worked together – whether there was some reading, and then interpretation, and then more reading, which seems most likely, or reading constantly and having the teaching going on at the same time. This, it seems, would have been very confusing. So I am inclined to think that there was reading, then interpretation, and more reading followed by interpretation, and so on throughout the morning.

Now it seems clear that the interpreting was just as necessary as the reading. The reading always came first followed by those who were trained to interpret. We find the same emphasis in the NT. In 1 Timothy 4:13 the Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy, “Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” There were evidently others who were teaching Timothy in addition to the Apostle Paul. The reading could have been, and probably was, the public reading of Scripture, because the NT was just in the process of being completed. We all have had many teachers, and it is very important to be under trained, experienced teachers. But the reading must come first.

Dr. Charles Feinberg was one of my teachers in Seminary. I had the privilege of getting to know him personally. He later taught at Talbot Seminary in California where John MacArthur sat under his ministry and was profoundly influenced by his ministry. Many times when I am listening to Dr. MacArthur I can hear in him inflections of speech, and sometimes even words that I have heard Dr. Feinberg use. But I tell you all of that to tell you this. Dr. Feinberg once told me (I don’t remember if it was in class, or to me in person conversation), but he told me that most false doctrine gets started by misreading the Word of God. That is why reading is so important. Perhaps you had had someone tell you as you were saying what you had read in Scripture, “But the Bible does not say that,” or “That is just a part of that doctrine.” Godly, experienced teachers, are

what all of us need. But basically, we all need to begin, and then to continue, reading the Word. If we don't know the truth, then we will never be able to discern truth from error. In Paul's last letter which became a part of the NT, he was writing to Timothy. He knew that he was not going to live much longer, and so he was greatly concerned for Timothy even though Timothy had shown great promise as a servant of the Lord. But this is what he said, and it is found in 2 Timothy 3:13-17:

13 But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.

14 But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them;

15 And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

17 That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

Now most of you are so familiar with this passage that you could probably quote it. But I want to call your attention to one part of this passage that you may not have paid much attention to before. It is the last part of verse 14. The whole verse reads, "But continue thou in the things which thou has learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them."

Now in the case of Timothy I can name three people I know who had been used by God to teach him the Word. And you probably know who they were too. The first was his grandmother whose name was Lois. The second was his mother whose name was Eunice. And the third one was the Apostle Paul. I am sure that there must have been others, but these were three of his teachers who had taught him the Word.

Before I leave this subject, let me read to you what the Apostle Paul said to the Ephesian elders whom he had planned to see on a visit which he knew would be his last time with them. It was a tearful, solemn time, but his words were never more needed than they are for the church today. Listen as I read part of his last message to them. These words are found in Acts 20:28-32:

28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

29 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

30 Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

31 Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

32 And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.

You probably don't need me to tell you this, but since the Devil lied and lied to Eve in the Garden of Eden, there has been more error believed in this world than there has been truth. And our generation has been told that there really is no absolute truth. And so we are constantly being bombarded with lies and told that it is the truth. I hope you see how very important it is that we know the truth of the Word of God, eternal, unchanging, the truth of God. Error is everywhere, and yet it is being put off as the truth. But it is never as dangerous as it is when men teach that the truth of God is a lie. How important it is for us to know the truth, the truth of the Word, because that is the only way we can be set free from the Devil's lies. It is in our politics. It is in our educational system. It is in our churches. It is everywhere.

8:8 This is Nehemiah's summary, and explains why they were doing what they were doing. There are three parts to this verse. The first two is what Ezra and Nehemiah were doing. They were devoting their

lives to this. They read the Word to the people. Then they interpreted what they read. And by their obedience to God in doing those two things, it was God Who gave them understanding. “Distinctly” means that the Word was read as it was, and was correctly explained and applied. How important it is that we do this, cannot be overemphasized. This is the type of ministry that the Lord blesses. It is the ministry that glorifies God, and the ministry that has a transforming effect in the lives of the people of God. This is how the Church, under the blessing of God, can again become a mighty force in the world.

April 5, 2010

8:9 Derek Kidner began this section which followed the day long reading of the word, by saying, “Three times in this short paragraph (verse 9-12) it is pointed out that holiness and gloom go ill together (p. 107). But he didn’t point them out, and so I looked for them. And I think that I even found that there are four of them:

1) The first in verse 9: “This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep.” He said this because as the people listened to the reading of the law, they were weeping. We are not told *why* they wept, but probably it was partly because the reading of the Word brought great joy to them after not having heard it for so long, but also because they realized how they had grieved the Lord by their disobedience and because of the judgment that they had experienced in exile, and, perhaps, in some ways after their return.. But Nehemiah made it clear that this was not a time for weeping.

2) The second is in verse 10: “. . . for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

3) The third is in verse 11: “. . . the day is holy; neither be ye grieved.”

4) The fourth is in verse 12 where you have the phrase, “to make great mirth.”

But Dr. Kidner followed this observation with this further comment:

What makes it rather striking, to our ears, is the calm assumption [in Scripture] that this should go without saying (p. 107).

This is a most important point for all of Scripture. Our Lord Jesus made this comment to His disciples which is found in John 15:11: “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.” The reaction that the disciples had to our Lord’s exposition of OT Scripture, point out how they spoke of Him, is a good illustration. See Luke 24:32:

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

So there was both joy and sorrow which came upon the hearts of the people as the Word of God which was read, but it is what the Apostle Paul would call when speaking of such circumstances, “godly sorrow.” Listen to Paul’s words found in 2 Corinthians 7:9-13:

9 Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing.

10 For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

11 For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

12 Wherefore, though I wrote unto you, I did it not for his cause that had done the wrong, nor for his cause that suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear unto you.

13 Therefore we were comforted in your comfort: yea, and exceedingly the more joyed we for the joy of Titus, because his spirit was refreshed by you all.

8:10 One thing that sin does to the people of God is to interrupt, or even mar, our fellowship with each other. We can't be out of fellowship with God and still be in fellowship with each other, and *vice versa*. So Nehemiah suggested that they go on with their lives, eating food, but that they also remember those of their number who were without proper food. And he promised them that such an expression of love for their own people, would be a blessing to them, and would strengthen them against sin in the future. Nehemiah was speaking from experience as we can be reminded by looking back at 5:14-19. (Read.)

These are simple lessons, but extremely valuable in keeping us from sin and experiencing the joy of the Lord in meeting the needs of others. It shows that the first two commandments are related closely to each other. True love for God will always result in love for the Lord's people, especially for those in need when we may be in a position to help.

8:11 Sin confessed (which was indicated apparently by the tears of the people), is sin forgiven. Therefore, we must not continue to dwell on it. The Lord requires repentance, but not penance. Let us make sure that we know the difference. So the Levites were quick to recognize that the people needed help in recognizing the forgiveness of God so that could rejoice in that holy day. So we can say that we have here a third evidence that holiness and sadness do not belong together. The Levites were exercising the responsibility as men who ministered to the people on God's behalf.

8:12 Here we see that the people profited immediately from what Nehemiah and the Levites had told them about repentance and joy.

On the second day we learn that the people were concerned about something else, and they looked to Ezra the scribe to help them in understanding what had been read to them the day before. We have here an illustration of the power of the Word. It is like going to church on Sunday, and then being reminded on Monday morning of something that you had heard previously in Sunday School, or in one of the services of the day, something that you were impressed by that called for action on your part. Or it may have been something that you didn't quite understand, but felt that it was important.

8:13 Here we learn that a part of the reading on the previous day had been in Leviticus 23 which had to do with the annual feast days (as they were called) which the people were to observe. Now remember that they were in the early part of the seventh month.

8:14 They heard, or possibly had learned for the first time, that in the seventh month they were to observe every year "the feast of the seventh month."

8:15 They also learned that in preparation for the observance of this feast that the whole nation was to be notified that they were to gather branches from many kinds of trees to make booths for them to live in according to what Moses had told them to do. And we find this instruction in Leviticus 23:33-36, 39-44. All of the Israelites were to live in these booths for seven days. No work was to be done during this week. But sacrifices were made each day. And these verses in Leviticus, especially that latter section, tell us that the purpose was, according to Leviticus 23:43,

That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

8:16 It seems that this was a surprise to the Jewish people who had returned from exile. They apparently had not done it before, nor had they heard of it. We are told in verse 17 that the feast of booths, or taber-

nacles, as it is also called, had not been observed since the days of Joshua. We are told in Ezra 3:4 that this feast had been observed by the first group of exiles who came back under Zerubbabel, and, before that, we are told in 2 Chronicles 7:9-10 that when the original temple was complete, there was an observance of the feast of tabernacles, or tents. But it had never been observed by the whole nation as it was at this time when the temple had been rebuilt and the walls of Jerusalem put up again. So the reading of the Law must have come to the people as something of a shock accompanied by alarm that they had neglected this which was such an important part of their responsibility to God. But they took steps immediately to do what they had learned from their reading that they were obligated to do, and failure left them open to judgment from God. The whole nation took part at this time. This is one of many instances recorded in the OT in which grace prevailed over the Law (as it often did with ancient Israel). So all over Jerusalem and throughout their land, these tents made of the branches of trees appeared on the roofs of houses, in the courts of the city, even in the temple court, and here and there in the streets. It must have been quite an amazing sight.

8:17 All who had returned out of captivity were doing something that they had never done before, “and,” as we read at the end of this verse, “there was very great gladness.” And this would have had for them the added event in their recent history of how the Lord had left them out of the Persian empire, and back into the land which the Lord had given them many years before.

8:18 One feature that was added was the reading of the Law every day of the feast of booths. We can imagine that the reading was followed by the keenest interest of the people lest there should be other things which they had neglected to do out of ignorance. There is no better way to be reminded of the will of God than to reading each day the Word of God. The people may have been thinking that since it had been that they had forgotten something as major as the feast of booths, or tabernacles, what else was there in the Law which they were neglecting even out of their ignorance. Ignorance is never a viable excuse for disobedience, but it is that which often leads to disobedience. It would be wonderful if we would respond as happily and promptly when we find ourselves in such a position as the Jews did when they heard the reading of the Word.

There is a passage in Deuteronomy which commanded the reading of the Word during the feast of booths every seven years. This may also have been part of what was read to the Jewish exiles on that particular year. Let me read it to you. It is found in Deuteronomy 31:9-13:

9 And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi, which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and unto all the elders of Israel.

10 And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles,

11 When all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

12 Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law:

13 And that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.

This is one major reason why we need to be reading the Word daily. In the days of Nehemiah the people had the problem of having to depend upon the public reading of the Word. But we have no such excuse. And yet it is possible that most of us today have forgotten some commandments of the Word which the Spirit of God has given to us in the past, but which has been neglected by us through the years. I doubt very much if people like yourselves who will come to a Tuesday morning Bible class in the middle of every busy week, would be guilty of neglecting the Word. But we all need to be careful to take time for the Word because it is so easy for us to

let the busyness of life draw us away from those times of reading that are so important for all of us.

April 6, 2010

Now let us take a few minutes to reflect on what the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt was to mean to them each year as the feast of booths, or of Tabernacles, or of deliverance, was to mean to them.

The first thing it was to remind them of was the bondage that they had experienced in the land of Egypt. It was a time of affliction and suffering. Perhaps they were reminded of how their forefathers had chafed under the Egyptian rule. It was a very trying time for the people of Israel.

Secondly, they would have remembered that, for their nation, it was a time when God was their only hope. They could do nothing to set themselves free. Even though they were greater in number than the Egyptians, the Egyptians had more power. They were helpless. Humanly speaking, they were utterly dependent upon God. There was no possibility that the Pharaoh or those who were in power with them, would change. Even the man whom God had raised up to deliver them, had sinned in running ahead of the Lord, and he was no longer in Egypt with them.

Thirdly, they learned the value of prayer. Perhaps there were those who remembered what their fathers and grandfathers had told them about those days because you will remember that the story of their deliverance from Egypt was a story that the fathers were to tell their children, and those children were to tell their children, and so on generation after generation. No Jewish person was ever to be ignorant of those days, neither were they to forget those days. The last three verses of Exodus 2 tell the story of their time in Egypt. Listen to what they tell us:

23 And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage.

24 And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

25 And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them (Ex. 2:23-25).

And so they learned in connection with prayer that it was important to pray because the nation was taught in those very difficult, apparently hopeless times, *that God answers prayer*.

And then fourthly, those days taught them much about God. They learned that through prayer God brought Moses back from Midian to be their deliverer. They learned much about the power of God, not only in the plagues that He brought upon Egypt, but also in the manner in which He forced the hand of Pharaoh and the Egyptians to tell the Israelites to go. But they also saw the mercy of God in giving the Egyptians time during the plagues so that they had a way of escaping the judgment which finally fell upon them when their firstborn sons died because of the Egyptians continued rebellion against Him. They saw the power of God when the Egyptians changed their minds and went after the Israelites to bring them back which ended with Pharaoh and his entire army being drowned in the Red Sea when they tried to do what the people of Israel had done in going through the Red Sea on dry land.

They saw the faithfulness of God for forty years in leading them, in providing for them, in protecting them, in spite of the many times that they had rebelled against God. And, along with that, they were to remember the amazing way in which God had fulfilled His promise to them concerning the land which God had given to them even though the people of the land were more numerous than they were, and stronger than they were. They learned that God was faithful to the promises that He had given them especially from Abraham on down.

I am sure that there is much more that could be said that they had the opportunity to learn about God, but let me

make one final point that was very apparent from the fact that they made those temporary booths, or tabernacles, in which they lived for one week every year. It was that there was always to be a separation between them and the other nations of the world. They were in the world, but they were not to be like the world. They were to live separated unto God. That is why they were not to worship the gods that the Gentiles worshiped. They were not to intermarry with the Gentiles. They were not to live by the standards that the Gentiles had set for themselves. They were to be a holy people, separated to and devoted to God alone.

This was the theme that was very basic, very fundamental to all that Moses emphasized in his final messages to Israel which were given to them in the final month of Moses' life. And they had been his message to them throughout his time of ministry to them. One passage where it is especially clear is Deuteronomy 7, the whole chapter, but let me read to you what Moses said to them which is recorded verbatim in Deuteronomy 7, verses 1-8. **(Read.)**

Today God is building His Church. His purpose for the Church is distinct from His purpose for Israel. And one of the keys to understanding the Word of God is to see that Israel and the Church are not the same. But both are under God's specific direction to be separated from the world. This is where Israel failed miserably, and this is where the Church is failing today. Many in the professing church today are intent on making the church like the world. Consequently the Church is not the powerful influence for good that it was in the early days of the Church, nor what it has been at various times in the history of the Church. This was very much upon the heart of the Lord as He got closer to the time of His death. See John 15:18-19. It was also on the Lord's heart as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. See John 17, especially verses 11b-17. And then we have passages like Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; 1 John 2:15-17.

And basic to all of this was that were given a hope that was to be always in their minds and hearts. And they were to learn that just having Jewish blood in their veins did not make them the people of God. Salvation was a personal matter. As the Apostle Paul had to learn, and as he emphasized in his preaching and in his divinely inspired writings:

28 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:

29 But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God (Rom. 2:28-29).

So while we are not under the commandments today regarding the feast of booths, we need to be constantly reminded that we, too, like Israel, are called to live lives of holiness, distinctly different from the world, and that by such obedience to God, people in the world will be made to realize what it means to be the people of God.

April 12, 2010

Now we are ready to move on into Nehemiah, chapter 9. Remember that chapters 8, 9, and 10 have to do with what amounted to a revival among the exiles who had come back to Jerusalem and various places throughout the land of Israel. We have read in the book of Ezra how the Temple was restored. This was followed in the book of Nehemiah by the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. But they should have learned from what some of them had experienced in the Babylonian captivity, and others had learned from their parents, that the original Temple and the original walls of Jerusalem did not mean that the people were living in fellowship with Lord.

I have been interested in the add of one of the men who is running for the office of Governor of the State of

Oregon, that he has said that under his leadership we would have better schools, and on and on. I don't know what he means by better schools. Does he mean better school buildings? I am sure that there are many communities in Oregon where the school buildings need repairs and improvements, and others where new buildings are needed. But, while buildings are important, they are not the answer to our educational needs. While we can't ignore the material needs we have, the important thing about our schools is what is going on in them. What are our children being taught? How are their questions being answered? I think most of you know what I mean. In many of our schools, our children and young people on up through college are being taught things that are far different from what our country was meant to be, and, to a great extent, what it used to be. So attention needs to be directed to who the administrators are, and who the teachers are and what they are teaching. They may be tearing down the very values that have made our country as great as it has been.

The same can be said about our churches. Churches are being built bigger and more ornate than ever before. And many of them are full of people. But what is going on in those churches? What are the people being taught? Is the program of the church patterned after what people get in the world, or are our churches places where people can go to hear the Bible taught, and can learn about God, and about themselves, and about what salvation is, and how God wants us to live.

We learned from the book of Ezra that the people weren't back in the land very long before they were going back to marrying Gentiles, which always led to worshiping their gods. A new Temple and new city walls were not the basic answer to the needs of the people. They needed to repent of their sins. They needed to separate themselves from the ways of the world, and from living like people live who don't know anything about the true and living God.

So it is encouraging to see in these chapters of Nehemiah, and those to follow, that there was a return to the reading of the Word in Nehemiah's day, and a return to the spiritual leadership and guidance of those whose hearts were set on pleasing God. Chapter 8 was a starter in that direction, and the rest of that book shows that that work continued at least for a time. I am as concerned about our country as most of you are, and the way in which our Constitution is being ignored by many in power. But we can get back to the Constitution and still not solve our problems. We need to get back to the Word of God, and do what Jerry Bridges has been teaching us to do, and that is to pursue holiness.

One time when Dwight and Nancy were living in California, we stayed in their home while they were on some trip. There was a large church that I had heard about, and we planned to visit it on a Sunday night. They had hundreds of people in their morning services, but they only had about three hundred on Sunday night, and they had to show "Christian films" to get them to come then. I am sure that by now they have no evening service at all. The tragedy about such situations is that people who make some claim to being Christians are being taught to come to be entertained, and many of the newer churches are designed with that in mind. But there is a great famine in our country of preaching the Word of God, and there is a scarcity of people who want to hear the Word. It is nice to have a big, new building, with all of the latest electronic equipment, but the big question is, what is going on when the people come?

Ezra and Nehemiah were very unusual men in their day. There weren't many like them. We know that there were prophets who proclaimed the Word. We know of three in particular: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. But they were the exception, not the rule. But they had an impact on the people that is very refreshing and instructive for us in our day. The question is not, how big and equipped is the building, but what is going on to bring to people the knowledge of the Gospel, and then to help them in their daily walk with the Lord.

Now look at the first three verses of chapter 9 to see what was going on after the walls of Jerusalem were back up. And I am thinking about what the people were doing.

9:1 Remember that just shortly before they that had observed the Feast of Tabernacles for a whole week.

Then afterwards we find them getting together again, but not dressed in all of their finery, nor to have a great meal together, but “fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them.” I have been going to church all of my life, but I have never been to a service like this which continued day after day.

Look at verse 2.

9:2 They “separated themselves from all strangers.” This has reference to unregenerate Gentiles, and maybe some Jews who gave no evidence of knowing the Lord. They didn’t sit down in comfortable pews, but they stood –for what purpose? The “confessed their sins.” But that was not all. They also were confessing “the iniquities of the fathers.” You see, when their fathers sinned against the Lord, they never stopped to think how their sins were going to affect the lives of their children. I am sure that this confession of “the iniquities of their fathers” was not in bitterness, but with hearts that were broken because many of their fathers never woke up to the far-reaching damage they were doing to the children. Children follow their parents, and those of us who are parents and grandparents need to remember this. And it seems that children are more likely to follow a bad example than a good one. That is why we need to be certain that we parents are setting a good example.

9:3 But these verses in chapter 9 get better that farther we read. Look at verse 3. What else did they do?

They were still standing and for one fourth of the day the Word of God was read to them, and then for another fourth of the same day they “confessed and worshiped the Lord their God.” Now if you know your math, you know that a fourth of a day is six hours, and two fourths make twelve hours. And there is no evidence that they took time out for lunch or for dinner. You see, when the Lord is working in your heart, you don’t want to take time out for food.

Now as I have gotten older, I have found that it takes a lot out of you just to stand. And I am sure that there were some older saints in this crowd who had trouble standing. But do you know what I think about their standing? I think that they were so occupied with the Lord that, as we are told in 8:10, “the joy of the Lord” was their “strength.” I can assure you that anyone who was there that day, old or young, they would never forget such a time in the presence of the Lord.

Those Jewish people were learning, and had learned before, that there was one main reason for all of the disruption in their lives when they were taken out of their own country by foreign invaders whose language they did not understand, and taken into exile. And that reason was S-I-N!!!

I took one of my dictionaries (and I have several of them), and looked up the word sin. And this is the theological definition that was given: Sin is “a condition of estrangement from God as a result of breaking God’s law” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, p. 1142). It really defines not only what sin is, but what sin does. I think I would revise that to say, *Sin is the breaking of God’s Word which result in a condition of estrangement from God.* Or we could say that *sin is doing anything, or saying anything, or thinking anything that is displeasing to God.* And where do we learn what is displeasing to God? From the Word. From the Bible. We are all born in sin, sinners by nature and sinners by choice. Salvation is the forgiveness of our sins and the establishment of fellowship with God. But even though we are forgiven, we can still sin. And once you have learned how wonderful fellowship with God is, to be estranged from Him is a most miserable state to be in. The reading of the Word showed the people of Israel, among many other things, their sin, and that brought confession which led them back into fellowship with God, and then caused them to worship the Lord.

What an amazing amount of truth is contained in those first three verses of Nehemiah 9. This was true revival.

And I hope we are learning a very, very important point for all of us to keep in mind. But it is also a point which disturbs me very deeply. Do you know why? I am sure that you do. It disturbs me greatly because we are living in a nation that is under the judgment of God, estranged from God, *but it seems that nobody who has the ear of the nation, is talking about sin.* I am very grateful for the conservative commentators who expose the wrong things that we are doing and the disaster that is ahead if we don't change. But our problems are simply the symptoms of the real problem. Our real problem is sin. Sin was Israel's problem. God is a gracious God. He doesn't strike us down for every sin we commit. If He did, no one would survive. God's patience is amazing! I marvel at His patience with me all of the time. But I learned a little verse many years ago. It is not a verse of Scripture, but it teaches the truth of Scripture. I will give it to you, and I hope you will remember it as I have. Here it is:

There is a line by us unseen; it crosses every path:

It is the boundary between God's patience and His wrath.

The Bible's version of this is found in Hebrews 10:31: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." And a little farther on in the book of Hebrews we read these words in Hebrews 12:28-29:

28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:

29 For our God is a consuming fire.

The margin of my Bible tells me that this is a quotation from Deuteronomy 4:24. So this that full verse tells us, "For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God." So for this verse to appear in the OT, and then to be quoted in the NT, tells us that truth applies in all times.

I heard one of the radio commentators who is well aware of what is going on today, say that he believed in God, but he believed that God was angry most or all of the time. Well, he only has part of the picture. "God is love," but when men spurn Him, whether a believer or one who does not believe, by disobeying God as his way of living, he needs not only to fear the judgment of God, but to expect it. On the other hand, when we repent from our hearts, and turn in faith to Him, He will have mercy. That is our only hope personally, and our only hope as a nation. Let's make the other changes that need to be made, but let us put God *first*, and then everything else will fit into place.

As I reminded you a week ago last Sunday in speaking of the fear of God, Solomon wrote in Proverbs 9:10,
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy (One) is understanding.

April 26, 2010

As we closed two weeks ago we were looking at the first three verses of Nehemiah 9. Those three verses are so full of truth that I spent the whole hour on them. These verses speak of revival. There is no evidence here that the people were called together by Nehemiah, or Ezra, or anyone else. It seems that there was a movement of the Spirit of God among the people. They came fasting, dressed in sackcloth (which was a sign of repentance), and with dirt on their heads. They separated themselves for unbelieving Gentiles, confessed their sins and the sin of their fathers, and stood while the Word of God was read to them for six hours, and then for another six hours they confessed their sins *"and worshiped the Lord their God."*

Note the order, the reading of the Word, the confession of their sins, and then the "worshiped the Lord their God."

I have just started reading a booklet written by A. W. Tozer who for 31 years was the Pastor of the Southside Alliance Church in Chicago. He died back in 1963. That was 47 years ago. And he was asking the question then, which is the title of this booklet, *"Whatever Happened to Worship?"* He emphasized many things that

were going on back in the 60's. I don't have much trouble imagining what he would say about our churches today. We have bigger churches today than ever before, but what are churches doing to get people to come to their services. We have worship teams, but is that what worship is? Dr. Tozer pointed out that even back 50 years ago that it was next to impossible to get people to attend prayer meetings. And do you know what he gave as the explanation? He said it is because "they are not worshipers" (p.17). What would he say about us today? Many churches have two or three morning services, but most of them have quit trying to have an evening service, and I notice coming to church on Wednesday nights that many churches that are truly evangelical in doctrine are dark because people just don't come on Wednesday nights. There is a lot that we need to learn from our Bibles, and even reading church history there have been many periods in the past when the people of God loved to go to church, and when they loved to pray together.

But what we do when we are in church has to be a reflection of what is going on in our homes, and beyond that, what is going on in our personal lives. It is with the people of God personally and individually, with all of us who claim to be the Lord's people, that the basis of worship is to be traced. As we read these verses, we need to ask ourselves, I need to ask myself, and you need to ask yourselves, are we worshipers? Well, you may say to me, How can I know if I am a true worshiper? That is an easy question to answer. There is one special place where all of us can learn to worship. It is on the pages of Scripture. I want us to take that word *worship* with us as we go through the rest of Nehemiah 9 because you will notice (and I hope that you already have noticed from your reading of this chapter) that from verse 4 to the end of verse 38, we have one, long prayer. And verse 3 (at the end of the verse) tells us that what the leaders and the people were doing, was worshipping.

Perhaps reading through this prayer we could say that *worship is prayer, and prayer is talking to God, but if prayer is to be true worship, it is talking to God about God, Who He is and what He does!*

When the Jews we are reading about in this chapter first began to pray, they prayed confessing their sins. That is one form of prayer. I am sure that many of them prayed for their families and then for other Jewish people, with possibly prayer for some of their Gentile neighbors. That is called intercession, another form of prayer. And then they would pray for themselves. The word that is often used for prayer for ourselves, is called petition. And then in prayer we give thanks to God for the way He cares for us, providing for us, protecting us. And you can see that that is called thanksgiving. It is closely related to worship, and yet worship is more than thanksgiving. Worship is when we go to the Lord to talk to Him about Himself. And this has to be the highest form of prayer. Worship does not have to be isolated by itself from other forms of prayer, but it often included with other forms of prayer. In fact, in this chapter we see that worship followed the confession of their sins and when they confessed the iniquities of their fathers. Worship needs to be personal when we go to the Lord alone, by ourselves. But in Nehemiah 9 we probably should call this one of the largest worship services to be recorded for us in Scripture – not necessarily the largest, but one of the largest. And it holds a lot of lessons for us on worship.

Let us get started in our study of this great prayer meetings.

9:4 One very interesting thing that we need to notice about this great prayer meeting, is that it was not led by Nehemiah, as you might think that it would be, nor by Ezra. But it was led by the Levites! Undoubtedly these men were in a special way the fruit of Ezra and Nehemiah, and I probably should also mention the prophets who ministered to the people in those days: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Of course the Lord God of Israel ultimately gets the glory, but I mention this because there is nothing that can be more encouraging to a leader, especially in times like we are reading about in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, than to see how the Lord raises up others to stand with you in the ministry. In this instance, the people were an encouragement to Ezra and Nehemiah, because as verse 1 tell us it was not because the people were called together for this time

of great blessing, but it was the Lord who was working in their hearts to get together to repent of their sins, to confess their sins, and to listen to the reading of the Word of God. It is very apparent that the Lord was working in the hearts of the people. I know that it was a very heart-moving experience for Ezra and Nehemiah especially. The people of Israel did not always respond like this. Remember how they wanted to kill Moses in their journey from Egypt to Canaan when things did not go like the people wanted them to go.

Here in verse 4 we learn that eight Levites stood on the stairs leading up to the platform that had been built for this occasion.

9:5 Then in verse 5 we also have eight names. But three names are dropped in the second list that were in the first list, and three names are added in the second list that were not in the first list. Why we have this difference, we do not know. May have to do with different responsibilities that three in the first list were dropped from the second list, and three others were added in the second list to take their place. It probably was clear to all of the people, and so we have to leave it there. There were two Bani's in the first list, one was dropped in the second list along with Bunni and Chenanai, and Hashabiah, Hodijah, and Pethahiah were added to take their place in the second list.

The men in the first group "cried with a loud voice unto the Lord their God," "cried" meaning to cry out in distress. The men in the second group "said, Stand up and bless the Lord your God for ever and ever," which would relieve their distress and glorify God.

And the worship of the remainder of the chapter is introduced by the eight men in the second group when they addressed the Lord, saying, "And blessed be Thy glorious Name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise." Derek Kidner says that this last part of verse 5 speaks of "God's unimaginable greatness" which is to be seen in God's glorious Name and which is to remain the same for all eternity, *i.e.*, "forever and ever." And with these words this prayer of worship actually begins.

9:6 The worship of the Jewish people on this occasion began with the Lord as the Creator. This would suggest that we should be prompted to worship the Lord from the very first page of Scripture. And in Lange's commentary we are told that the worship contained throughout this chapter is based upon various verses to be found in the Scriptures. Remember that it is thought that Ezra was probably the first one to compile the OT Scriptures. For example, we read in Psalm 86:10, "For Thou art great, and doest wondrous things: Thou art God alone." And also Exodus 20:11, "For in six days the Lord made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that in them is . . ." The people had been listening to the reading of the Word of God. We are not to think that all of the people prayed this prayer. It was probably the Levites who alternately lead the people. God is unique. There is no other God but the Lord. He is incomparable in Who He is, and if we believe in the uniqueness of God, existing before creation, without beginning, and responsible for all of creation, not only bringing it all into existence by the spoken Word, but sustaining it all year after year from the very beginning, how awesome He is. Angels are "the host of heaven," and the people are to recognize that the primary action of the angels is that they worship and adore the God Who made them. When we contemplate the truth in just this one verse, our hearts should be humbled before such a great God. There is nothing about creation that exalts either angels or men, but exalts and glorifies the great and good and wise and power God Who made it all, and Who sustains it all.

All through the Bible, not only in the OT, but also in the New, we find numerous references to God and His creation, and these are designed to cause us to turn and worship the Lord. We know that when we speak of the Lord as the Creator, we are including all three members of the Godhead and the attributes which made such an amazing work possible. Those who argue for evolution or any other idea about the creation of the universe are

overlooking the greatness of God and rob Him of glory that is due to Him. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth His handiwork” (Psa. 19:1)

As we read the Word, may every mention of creation cause us to stop and worship the Lord.

9:7 Here we move from Genesis 1 and 2 to Genesis 11 and 12. As the Jewish people continued in their worship, they are awed at the goodness and sovereignty of God Who chose Abraham. Abram, as he was first called, did not choose God, but God chose Him. And He call Abram out of pagan darkness where he was a worshiper of false gods, and changed his name to Abraham. The people in their worship simply mentioned that God changed his name to Abraham when he was ninety-nine years old. This is in Genesis 17. The earliest age given to us of Abram was seventy-five when he left Haran after his father Terah had died, and then entered Canaan, the land which the Lord had promised him. All along in Abraham’s life the only thing that Abraham had to go on was the promise of God. His name change which was given to him by God was that Abraham would be the father of many nations. In Genesis 12 we learn that the Lord had promised him that all of the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham, which was the promise of world-wide salvation.

We get the idea quickly, as we go through this prayer, that we need to cultivate the habit not only of reading through the Bible, but also that we need to learn to pray through the Bible looking on every page for truth about God that will cause us to worship Him.

9:8 The people continued on in the worship of the Lord as they remembered the covenant which God had made with Abraham, and God had been faithful to His covenant promise. Keil said that the people’s recognition of the righteousness of God concerning the Canaanite nations meant that God’s Word and His deed correspond with each other. If God says it, He will do it. His promise is always sure to be fulfilled. The Jews in Ezra and Nehemiah days could look back and see that God had done what He had promised Abraham that He would do. They were worshipping God because, although they had been removed from the land which God had given to them, now they were back, and they could tie this in with the promise that God had given to Abraham.

9:9 Now we are in the book of Exodus. Think of the events that are covered in this verse. Things had done well for Abraham’s descendants until Joseph died, and the new Pharaoh had forgotten him. But God had not forgotten them. Although the Jews in Egypt were not aware that God saw what they were experiencing in Egypt, yet looking back they realized that the Lord knew all of the time when they were going through when the Egyptians were really afflicting their forefathers. And then it looked like many of them would die when Pharaoh and his army came after them, only to see God do something that he had never done before, opening the Red Sea in which Pharaoh and his army were destroyed when they tried to do what the Israelites had done. And it was then that Moses wrote that great hymn of worship which the people had never forgotten as they sang about the victory and deliverance that the Lord had given them.

9:10 And then, as though they had missed something very important about the Lord’s deliverance of His people from Egypt, the people went back to remember, not just the works of the Lord, but that they were “signs and wonders,” that is, they spoke to the Jews of the presence and power of God by which He made the mighty power of Egypt look like nothing in comparison with the greater power of God.

The people of God in Ezra and Nehemiah’s day were another exodus, not like the first, but when God had worked upon the hearts of the kings of Persia so that they willingly let the Jews go back to their land without a repetition of what God had done before. And as they looked back upon what their forefathers had experienced, they could see that God had made a Name for Himself in Egypt, and their experience in rebuilding the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, was yet another event in the history of the Jewish people when they were reminded

of the glorious name of the Lord. He had worked in a different way, but it was all due to the mighty power and grace of God which should not have taken them by surprise.

April 27, 2010

9:11 Here the people went back in their prayer to the way that the Lord delivered them through the Red Sea, and like many other references in Scripture to the passage through the Red Sea, they praised the Lord that the bed of the Red Sea was “dry land.” If that had not been the case, the passage of the nation through the Red Sea could have been one of the greatest disasters in their history. But the Lord took care of every detail.

But what was God’s deliverance for the Israelites, was total disaster for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. What is faith for the child of God can be presumptive folly for God’s enemies.

9:12 In this verse they remembered how God had taken care of every detail. He did not just lead them in the night with a pillar of fire, but His guidance for them in the daylight was just as clear and constant. None of them had ever been that way before, and so it was just as important for them to know their way in the daytime, as in the night. But what all of this meant was brought out even more wonderfully in Exodus 13:21-22:

21 And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night:

22 He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.

This would have encouraged the Jewish people that the Lord had been with them in their captivity, that He had been with them in their return to Jerusalem, and that to Him belonged all of the glory for what they had accomplished in building the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem. God’s presence with us at all times is one of the greatest sources of comfort and encouragement that any of us as the Lord’s people have ever had. And it is good to speak often of this to the Lord.

9:13 And then the people remembered what the Lord had given to them at Mount Sinai. It was there that God had given them the Word, much of which had been read to them during the first six hours of that day – notice the adjectives that the people used along with the titles of the various parts of the Word. They were “right judgments, and true laws, good commandments and judgments.” The list is continued in verse 14.

9:14 The Sabbath is mentioned in particular, but then again the commandments in the form of precepts, statutes, and laws which God had revealed to them through Moses, and which were permanently recorded “by the hand of Moses, Thy servant,” as the people said. So the people were recognizing that the Word which had been read to them for six hours was not the word of Moses, but the Word of God, and that they were given as commandments to them as descriptive of the way the people were to live, the special days they were to observe, and the holy standards which were to be maintained by the people if they were to have the blessing of the Lord upon them.

9:15 But they remembered how God had miraculously taken care of the physical needs of His people. And now we are in Exodus 16. God gave them the manna, providing for them daily. But he also gave them water, not mainly from wells or rivers, but out of rocky cliffs where there was no water until the Lord miraculously provided it for them. But the Lord, according to His promise given first to Abraham, and then frequently repeated for their encouragement, was leading them to a land where their needs would be met abundantly. It was a land “flowing with milk and honey.” The word “sworn” means that God had not just given His Word to His people as promises, but for the strengthening of their faith, He had “confirmed” it all with “an oath.” So they had God to guide them, His Word to teach them, His presence to lead them and to protect them, His pro-

vision to meet their needs. The Lord had not overlooked a single thing that the people needed for their journey nor for their occupation of the land.

Everything was fine except for the people themselves, and this is brought out in verse 16. The main problem that the people had was rooted in their hearts.

9:16 The people were proud. They thought that they knew better what they should do, and where they should go, than God did! And so they hardened their hearts repeatedly against the Lord, and they refused to keep the Lord's commandments. Note how in prayer they admitted that it was "the iniquities of their fathers" (9:2) that had been the main problem in their journey from Egypt to Canaan. If their eventual occupation of the land had depended upon the fathers, the people never would have made it. The depth and repetition of their disobedience is further described in verse 17.

9:17 We are told here four things that the people did which expressed their opposition to the will of God. And it is clear that the people would never have reached the promised land if it had not been for the character of God which is expressed by the people in the latter part of verse 17. Let us remember that the manifestation of the grace of God was not reserved until the NT, as some believe. If it had not been for the grace of God in the OT, there never would have been a nation of Israel, nor would we have a Savior today. The latter part of verse 17 shows how the people were worshiping the Lord in this prayer as they reviewed the early days of their history.

9:18 Their fathers had attributed to the golden calf that Aaron had made for them, the glory for their deliverance from Egypt. How could they have stooped any lower? It is amazing that the Lord did not destroy the whole nation. Instead we see in the next verses that the Lord did not take away from them the blessing that He had given them.

9:19 The Lord did not leave them to die in the wilderness. He continued to lead them by His presence.

9:20 The Lord gave them His Spirit to continue to teach them. He continued to give them manna and water although there were times when heavy judgments fell upon the people. And the extent of God's faithfulness to them is mentioned in verse 21.

9:21 We remember how when the Lord was ready to send the people into Canaan, but how the people rebelled again when the spies came back from the land saying that the people were tall, and too numerous for them, and the walls of the cities were too high. And so they refused to go in. That is when the Lord finally judged the nation for forty years until there were none left of the adults which initially had come out of Egypt. And yet during that time the Lord saw to it that the people "lacked nothing." This was amazing grace!

And God's grace continued on them in spite of their continued rebellion and disobedience even after they got into the land. This was reviewed by the people in the following verses.

Note the blessing of the Lord in **9:22-25**.

The blessing was followed by years in which the nation was rebellious against the Lord. See **9:26-30**.

Why was the nation not destroyed completely? For just one reason. It all goes back to the character of God. See **9:31-32**. And the prayer ends with the vindication of God in all that He had done to the nation. And they expressed their intention to make a covenant with God that things would be different in the future. See the

final verses of the chapter in **9:33-38**.

Notice the word “covenant” in verse 29. There are many covenants mentioned in Scripture. There are also vows in Scripture. I don’t really know the difference between a covenant and a vow. There are times when they may be used interchangeably. But usually it seems that a covenant was a major document, including a large number of people, while a vow could be between a single person and God. Both covenants and vows are promises. Vows are promises which people make to God, usually an individual person. We read, for example, in Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 we read how important it was for people, when they made a vow, to the Lord, they should do it with every intention of doing it.

4 When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.

5 Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.

Sometimes God made covenants with men, and sometimes men made covenants with God. What we have here in verse 38 is a covenant that the people were making with God. The details of the covenant are given in Nehemiah 10. Actually the word “covenant” does not actually appear in the Hebrew text, but the verb used means *to cut* which is the word usually used in establishing a covenant. You would “cut” a covenant. And so this, in the minds of the translators, justified the use of the word “covenant,” which seems right.

Our Bibles are divided into an Old Covenant, or Old Testament, and a New Covenant, or New Testament. Covenants were binding upon those who made them. God has never failed in keeping his Covenants, either the Old or the New. But unfortunately people do not have a perfect record. We can be sure that Ezra and Nehemiah, and those who were associated closely with them, were delighted with the way the people responded to God in Nehemiah 10, but as we go through the Bible we see how the people of God failed time and time again to keep promises that they made to the Lord. But their failure under the Old Covenant showed the necessity for a New Covenant.

As sincere as the people were, their intention did not succeed. The Apostle Paul in Romans 8:3 and 4 explained the reason for the failure of this covenant as for Israel’s failure throughout the OT:

3 For what the law [this was the Old Covenant] could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:

4 That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit [which is a reference to the New Covenant].

Now we move on to Nehemiah 10 to see that the further response of the people of Israel after praying unitedly as they did, according to chapter 9, was to establish a covenant with the Lord, which we have in chapter 10. And we can rejoice in what they covenanted together to do in their future relationship with the Lord. They did what they covenanted before God to do for a while, but not permanently. But let us rejoice in what they did for a time, and look for the only real answer that there is for consistent obedience on our part today. The answer is to be found now under the Old Covenant but under the New Covenant. The main discussion of the New and its Superiority over the Old is in what NT book? The book of Hebrews.

May 3, 2010

10:1-27 These were the men who signed the covenant.

10:28-29 These were the people who joined with them in agreeing to the covenant. In just a word, it included all of the Jewish people. (Read.)

The main points of the covenant are given in the verses which follow.

10:30 They agreed not to intermarry with the heathen people who were then living in the land of Israel, While the Jews had been in exile, various nations, probably mainly Canaanites, had moved into the land, And it was intermarriage with them which had been such a great problem at the end of the book of Ezra. But Moses had warned them about this in Exodus 7:1-6.

The first time that the descendants of Abraham were tempted with this was in Genesis 34 when the Hivites suggested this to Jacob and his sons after Shechem defiled Jacob's daughter, Dinah. The plan of the Hivites was that they could ultimately take over everything that Jacob and his sons had.

10:31 One of the first restrictions placed upon the people in the ten commandments had to do with the Sabbath. No work was to be done. The Jews under Nehemiah had been guilty of working on the Sabbath. In fact, before the book of Nehemiah closed, the Jews were again doing this very thing in violation of the Sabbath. See Nehemiah 13 15-22. See also Numbers 15:32-36 where a man was stoned for gathering sticks on the Sabbath Day. Buying and selling on the Sabbath Day, of course, was work which they were forbidden to do by the Mosaic Law.

10:32-33 In Exodus 30:11-16 are the verses which apply here. The people were taxed for the expenses of the Tabernacle, a half of a shekel. Here it was a third probably because the people as a whole were not able to pay more. But they gave what they could, and evidently the Lord was satisfied with the lesser amount. Much of the expenses that the Jews assumed in all of the building they had done, had been provided by the Persian government, but Nehemiah, Ezra and the people evidently recognized that to please the Lord they needed to go back to what the Lord's plan had been from the beginning. The Lord's work is to be supplied, not by the world, but by the Lord's people themselves as a result of the work that they would do. The people of God in every age need to learn to trust the Lord to meet their own needs, and then to give to the support of the Lord's work from their hearts, because the love the Lord and want to please Him.

10:34 Probably not many of us that the supply of wood for the offering of the sacrifices, was a major need of the Temple worship. So this was supplied by the casting of the lot so that it would not be the responsibility of the same people all of the time.

10:35-39 The offering of the firstborn went back to the Exodus. See Exodus 13:11-12. And the same was true of the firstfruits of the land. It became one of the major feast days to be observed every year. See Leviticus 23:9-22. It was an offering of thanksgiving to the Lord for His blessing upon the work of their hands.

Derek Kidner has a very significant conclusion to this chapter of reform that we have just completed. He said, The final pledge, *We will not neglect the house of our God* (39) sums up not only the paragraph but much of the concern of the post-exilic prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Before the exile, the Temple had too often been a mere talisman [a charm, a magic wand], and its well-patronized activities a sedative for the conscience (see above all, Jer. 7). Now the temptation was the opposite: to grudge the effort and expense of it all. The mood is captured and castigated in Malachi. The very different tone of this chapter is some measure of Ezra's and Nehemiah's leadership, and of the impact of the Word of God on those who were exposed to it at length and depth. On this, see again 8:7ff., 12ff., 18; 9:3 (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 116, 1117).

Read Malachi 1:6-14. Here we see exactly what Israel's promise was as the nation approached the end of God's revelation in the OT. But we learn from the first letter to the churches in Revelation 2:1-7 that this was not only a OT problem, but this was also a NT problem. It has always been a problem which the people of God

have had in their relationship with God. It is a problem in the Church today. It is probably true that it is a problem, a sin, of which most of us have been guilty at one time or another. Let us examine our own hearts to make sure that it is not our problem today. 2 Chronicles 7:14 is an indication that this was a problem at that time in Israel. It has to do with the people which the Lord called, "My people."

There is evidence of this in the terrible account of the young man who was tempted into sin in Proverbs 7 by the woman whose husband was away. One point in her argument with the young man is stated in verses 14 and 15 of Proverbs 7:

14 I have peace offerings with me; this day have I payed my vows.

15 Therefore came I forth to meet thee, diligently to seek thy face, and I have found thee.

She felt justified in committing adultery because she had met her obligations to the Lord. How many who profess to be Christians today feel that they are justified in doing whatever else they want to do on Sunday and the rest of the week because they have gone to church on Sunday morning. Let us all recognize that none of us can buy the right to sin by anything we might do which we believe is pleasing to God. There are multiplied thousands of people who are in church on Sunday morning (or Saturday night) who feel that they have met their obligation to the Lord the rest of the week. Such an idea made the prostitute of Proverbs 7 even more guilty before God.

The men who wrote on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in Lange's commentary (he was the editor) say that the points which are emphasized in this chapter, were the very places where the people of God in their day had failed, and, as a result, the judgment of God had fallen upon them. It is important not only that we obey the Lord, but that we obey from our hearts. Mere outward obedience will not last. It becomes boring, and what bores us we are inclined to leave alone. In Ezra and Nehemiah's day the time and cost of doing God's will became a burden to them, and so they soon fell away from doing the Lord's will at all, or just continued as a formality, which is never pleasing to the Lord.

May 10, 2010

We come now to chapter 11 where it is very apparent that these people who had been in captivity, first in Babylon, and then in Medo-Persia, which ultimately was Persia, the Jewish people had not forgotten the covenant that the Lord had made with Abram (Gen. 12:1-2), and, first of all, that which had to do with "the land." But they were also concerned about the Law with its Tabernacle and all of the commandments, sacrifices, and ceremonies which had been given to them by Moses. Specifically they remembered what the Lord had told Moses to tell the people just as he prepared to give the Law to the people whom He had delivered from Egypt and their captivity, the only life that that particular generation had known. And I am referring to what we read in Exodus 19:3-6:

3 And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel;

4 Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself.

5 Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine:

6 And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.

It would have been expected, if there had not been something very special about the nation of Israel, that the people could have been set free to go where they wanted to go, to do what they wanted to do, and so there would have no longer been any nation of Israel. But they were a unique because God had chosen the descendants of Abraham to be His own nation among all of the nations of the earth. And His promise was irrevok-

ble. The nation might displease the Lord (which they did time and time again), but the Lord promised that He would never forsake them. And the wonderful thing about the Lord, His purposes, and His power, is that, as the Apostle Paul would write later, He works in us “to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). So as we read about the people planning to inhabit Jerusalem, and to occupy the land outside of Jerusalem, we are to give the glory to God, and not to the Jews themselves.

The same truth applies to the Church today, and to the lives of those who know Jesus Christ as Savior. Our record with the Lord is far from perfect, but His record with us is flawless. And we may drift away, but he always brings His own back to Himself. Even our best efforts fall short of perfection, and so the glory for what we do that pleases the Lord, goes to Him, not to us. Remember also what we are told in Hebrews 13:20-21:

20 Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,

21 Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Now what we read about in Nehemiah 11 and 12, has to do primarily with Judah, Benjamin, and the Levites, but 2 Chronicles 9:3 mentions also Ephraim and Manasseh which were also involved in this populating of the land. And so we can probably assume correctly that all of the tribes were involved. Judah and Benjamin, you will remember, were the southern kingdom of Judah; the other ten tribes comprised the northern kingdom of Israel, the way the entire nation was divided in the days of Rehoboam and Jeroboam. Probably the prominence gives to Judah and Benjamin was because the promise of a coming Messiah had to do with Judah.

11:1-2 The population of the city of Jerusalem, was their first concern. It was decided by casting lots that one out of every ten people, presumably from Judah and Benjamin, would live in the city. And there were evidently some of the people who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. All of the people were pleased by the response, and praised the men who volunteered. How many this was out of the whole group, we are not told. But it was encouraging that so many obeyed the rulers without being forced to do so. Such a response is also always pleasing to the Lord.

For the first time in Scripture Jerusalem is called, “the Holy City. See 11:1, and again in verse 18. This was a name that they were to live up to. It was holy because that is the place where the Lord had chosen to dwell. But it was to be holy, set apart from the rest of the world, and set apart for God, His worship and His glory. And the people in it were to be a holy people. It was really the place of greatest danger, and, therefore, of the greatest need. But, as is always the case, the greatest defense of the holy city and the holy people is the holy God. So there was a great responsibility attached to living in Jerusalem.

11:3-24 There are numbers listed in many of the verses in this section. If I have totaled them correctly, there are three thousand and forty-four. But this must be just the men. When you add the women and the children, the total would be much higher.

Notice the groups that are mentioned: Judah (vv. 4-6), Benjamin (vv. 7-14), the Levites (vv. 15-20), and “the residue of Israel, *i.e.*, other tribes, priests, Levites, and the Nethinims (vv. 20-24).

11:25-36 The rest of chapter 11 has to do with the villages immediately outside of the city of Jerusalem itself.

Many, many years ago the writer of this portion of the Lange commentaries spoke of how really insignificant all of this was at the time. The city was not large, the people were not numerous, and the land which the people occupied at the time was not significant. Compared with God’s purpose for this tiny nation, one writer has said that Jerusalem at the time “was almost as a vanishing nothing” But then they went on to say this:

And nevertheless what powers for the subjugation of entire humanity, for the transformation of all its relations, and for subduing of all circumstances, has God the Lord been able to put in the people of this oasis, in the, at the same time insignificant, and in many respects, miserable race, which cultivated the ground there, or raised cattle! If anywhere surely here arises a testimony for Paul's word, "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty" (1 Cor. 1:27).

And then these writers drew from that situation an application for us today:

A consoling promise also for Christendom in those time in which it appears as though it were being compressed on all sides, and when it is in truth losing position after position. Let it lose in length and breadth, in order afterwards to gain so much the more in height. Even the gates of hell cannot swallow up the church of the Lord (Crosby, Howard, *The Book of Nehemiah*, p. 49)

This situation fits in with David killing Goliath, and like the Lord feeding the five thousand with five loaves and a few small fish. It is fitting that we in the Church of our Lord should feel insignificant and helpless in these days when we are not a leading contender. But let us remember 2 Corinthians 12:10 where Paul declared a very important truth. Paul had a thorn in the flesh which he asked the Lord to remove. Listen to Paul's response to the Lord found in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10:

8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Obviously genealogies do not make for very interesting reading to us, but they are important especially as they lead on to Christ. And genealogies such as we find here in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah help us to understand how God held things together even in the worst times that God's people in the OT had. Our Lord was not a priest after the order of Aaron, but after the order of Melchizedek, nevertheless the Aaronic priests had a very important role regarding the spiritual lives of an often rebellious and sinful nation of Israel.

Nehemiah 12

Here Nehemiah went back to mention the priests and Levites who came back to the land of promise which we studied in the book of Ezra. Aaron and Moses were Levites, and of the family of Kohath. Aaron was the first high priest of Israel. It is good for us to be reminded that the ministry of the priest was from man to God. The prophet, on the other hand, ministered from God to man. He received his message from God, and delivered it to man. There were some prophets who are called writing prophets because their works are included in the Holy Scriptures, – the prophet Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah, and so on.

The priests were the ones who presented the sacrifices of the people to the Lord. And so even though at times in Israel's history the priesthood was corrupted, yet the Lord sustained that group throughout the history of the OT.

12:1-9 Here we have the names of the priests who returned to the land of Israel under Zerubbabel.

12:10-26 The list of priests here goes from Nehemiah's day to approximately 100 years after Nehemiah. So the list had to be completed by someone else. The list is not complete, but it shows the hand of the Lord in maintaining this office which was so important in the relationship of the people to God, and of God to the people. A lot of time could be spent in digging into the history of these times that we are reading about, but

that is not the main concern I have had in teaching the books of Ezra and Nehemiah here each Tuesday. I have been looking for the truth that will give us blessing and strengthen us in our faith. The historical details are important, but not the most important. We need to be looking for those events and teachings which will impress the truth upon our hearts.

So now let us turn to what is recorded for us about the dedication of the walls. Remember that the building of the Temple came first, and then the building of the walls of the city. So Ezra comes before Nehemiah in our Bibles because that was their order historically.

What was the purpose of having a wall around a city? A wall was for protection. But when a wall was built, could the people who built it be absolutely certain that they would never be defeated? No, because the original city of Jerusalem had a wall, and yet the wall did not stop the Babylonians! And there was another problem facing the children of Israel at this time. It was that it would have been impossible for all of those who had returned from the exile to get into the city at one time.

Since this was the case, why didn't they build walls around all of the little villages where most of the people lived so that everybody could be safe? Was God more concerned about the people who were inside the wall than He was about those who were outside? And if living in the wall meant protection from their enemies, why did they draw straws, so to speak, to get more people to live inside of the wall?

I have a lot of questions about the wall, don't you? And remember that one of the things that caused the fathers of Israel to say about the Canaanites that they knew that they could not get into the cities of Canaan because the walls were too high. And yet when the time came that they were willing to go in under Joshua's leadership, there was not a single Canaanite nation that could safely hide within their wall. Why build the wall if it was not going to be a sure, safe place, to protect even a part of the nation from their enemies – and they had enemies all around them as they do today?

Now before I answer those questions, let me point out another interesting feature about the dedication of the walls. I frankly am surprised at the kind of a dedication service that they had. Think of what a different kind of dedication we Americans would have had if we were going to dedicate anything that we might build – not only a wall, but possibly a bridge, or a new government building in Washington. I remember when the buildings at Multnomah were dedicated, and likewise when Dallas Seminary dedicated some of their new buildings.

What do we do? Well, we invite the architect. And then we invite the general contractor. And we wouldn't forget the people who contribute heavily to the project. We might even name the wall after the person who contributed the most money for it. And we must not forget the mayor. Nehemiah didn't do anything like we would have done. You can be sure that most of the people were there, but that was about the only similarity between the dedication that we read about here in the book of Nehemiah in comparison with the what we would have done.

We see from verse 27 that the Levites were in charge. And their charge was "to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singings, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps." The latter part of verse 36 tells us about the instruments that they were using. This was not the kind of a celebration that the Persians or the Babylonians would have put on. This was uniquely a dedication to the Lord, to honor the Lord.

I wonder if you were impressed with one characteristic about this dedication that impressed me. It seems like everybody was singing. They were singing before they went inside the wall, and they sang in two separate groups on the wall. Everybody was singing, and they were singing wherever they were. But the thing that impressed me about their singing is mentioned in verse 27: it was "with thanksgivings" (plural). Verse 31 tells

us that the two groups on the walls “gave thanks.” Verse 38 tells us about another group that “gave thanks.” Verse 40 mentions those two groups of singers again and says that they “gave thanks in the house of God, and Nehemiah gave thanks with them, and so did the rulers. This thanksgiving may all have been in song. Look at verse 43 while I read it to you. People far off heard the rejoicing that was going on in and around Jerusalem, and that was not over radio, or TV, or the internet, but just loud singing songs of thanksgiving.

And then finally look at verses 45 and 46 which tells us that there was some customs in their past history which helped them to have a real dedication of the wall of Jerusalem. And then listen to verse 47.

Wouldn't you love to have been there that day? We wouldn't have been able to understand their language, but we would have gotten the message of their singing because it would have been written all over their faces.

Now let me ask you a question. When a group of God's people get together to celebrate anything like the wall of Jerusalem, and they give thanks, and keep on giving thanks. To whom were they giving thanks – to Nehemiah, to those who planned what the building should look like, or who else? You know the answer to that question as well as I do. *They were giving thanks to God!!!!* The One and the only One Who was held the place of honor at this dedication, was the Lord God.

Well, what was the purpose of the wall if it could not save all of the people, or even guarantee that some would be saved in an attack from an enemy nation? It was a symbol, a symbol of what one of their prophets who had been ministering to them, had taught them about a wall, not a wall of bricks and mortar, but what would be infinitely much better. Zechariah had taught them about “a wall of fire.” Listen as I read to you from the prophecy of Zechariah, chapter 2, verses 1 through 5:

- 1 I lifted up mine eyes again, and looked, and behold a man with a measuring line in his hand.
- 2 Then said I, Whither goest thou? And he said unto me, To measure Jerusalem, to see what is the breadth thereof, and what is the length thereof.
- 3 And, behold, the angel that talked with me went forth, and another angel went out to meet him,
- 4 And said unto him, Run, speak to this young man, saying, Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein:
- 5 For I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her.

The wall around Jerusalem, as beautiful as it must have been, a great work of art, yet it was nothing without the Lord. So the people dedicated the wall of Jerusalem, knowing that the real value of the wall was that it was to be a constant reminder that the Lord was their true wall. He and He alone could keep them from sin, could guard them and deliver them from their enemies, and who would finally take them to Himself where they would no longer think about walls on earth because they would be with the One Who is our Keeper and our Wall.

I don't mean to minimize the building of the wall of Jerusalem, but whatever protection it gave them, they should remember, and we should too, that the Lord is our defense. He is our keeper, and we need not fear, therefore, what men might try to do to us. This is what King David said in Psalm 56:11, “In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me.”

How can we read a chapter like this, and not bow our heads and lift our voices, not just in thanksgiving, but in thanksgiving *to the Lord*? Let us pray.

May 17, 2010

We come at last to the final chapter of the book of Nehemiah. A word is important about the order of events in this chapter.

Nehemiah was governor of Jerusalem for twelve years. Those dates were probably 445-443 B.C. The first three verses of chapter 13 belong with chapter 12. "On that day" in verse 1 of this chapter has to do with the day in which the dedication of the wall was completed. Then we need to skip down to verse 6 where we are told that after the dedication of the wall Nehemiah had returned to Susa according to the promise he had made to Artaxerxes when he was first given permission to go to Jerusalem. During his absence as Derek Kidner has said, "the city . . . had settled down . . . to a settled compromise with the Gentile world" about them (p. 129). Then we go back to verses 4 and 5 to see what had happened during the time that he was away, and verses 7 through 9 tell how Nehemiah took care of the situation. Kidner says that when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem the first time, he was like a whirlwind, but when he returned, as chapter 13 shows, he was "all fire and earthquake" (*Ibid.*). Nehemiah was a very godly man, and a very strong leader. And he carefully followed the orders that God had given to His people especially through another very godly man, Moses.

It ought to be a warning to us to see how quickly the children of Israel departed from the ways of the Lord even after the long and difficult years of their exile. They reverted, as we have seen, on more than one occasion to the very things that had originally caused the Lord to bring the Babylonians into Jerusalem to take the southern kingdom of Judah into exile. And they had what had happened earlier to the northern kingdom of Israel as a warning also, but that did not stop Judah from departing from the Lord. Both the Old and New Testaments are full of illustrations of how quickly sin can take over in the lives of the people of God. So we need to be constantly on guard over our own hearts lest we follow the inclinations that we also have to walk according to the flesh instead of walking in the Holy Spirit.

13:1 What was done here was probably carried out by the Levites who are mentioned as being so prominent at the end of chapter 12. But we can be sure that both Ezra and Nehemiah were the main ones who were behind the reading of the Word. The importance of reading the Word of God can never be overemphasized. A new believer finds things in the Word that he never realized before were sinful, and older, more mature believers keep themselves reminded of everything that is both pleasing and displeasing to God. In Psalm 119 we read both that "the entrance of Thy Word giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple" (Psa. 119:30) and "Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee" (Psa. 119:11). Listen to the words which must have been read to the people on that day from Deuteronomy 23:3-6:

- 3 An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord for ever:
- 4 Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee.
- 5 Nevertheless the Lord thy God would not hearken unto Balaam; but the Lord thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because the Lord thy God loved thee.
- 6 Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days for ever.

We know from the story of Ruth the Moabitess that there were certain exceptions to this law because she had embraced the God of her mother-in-law, Naomi. But restrictions like this were in place because, as tragically happened even to Solomon, the saints are pulled down and away from the Lord; not the opposite. That was the problem.

The same principle applies in the Church today. It is clearly stated in Romans 12:1 and 2, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 and 1 Peter 1:14-16. It is regrettable that so many churches are ignoring these basic commands given to us in the Word of God.

13:2 See Numbers 22-24 as the historical background. Remember that the failure of the Jewish people along

this line was the problem back in Ezra 9 and 10. See also Nehemiah 10:28. This was the greatest of the sins of the Jews because it led to other sins and great departures from God among the Jewish people.

13:3 We see here that the problem extended far beyond the Ammonites and the Moabites, but included all of the Canaanite nations. The extent of it was incredible! This is an outstanding example of presumptuous sin – sinning while knowing that what you are doing is displeasing to God.

13:4 Another problem which results from intermarriage with unbelievers, is that it often draws sympathizers from among the Lord's people. This is a favorite trick of the Devil. Judas was an example of this. We have seen how Tobiah seems to have taken over the leadership of Israel's enemies from Sanballat, so this makes what Eliashib the priest that much more despicable. The word "allied" which is used to describe the relationship between Eliashib and Tobiah could mean that they were relatives, but that is doubtful. It probably means that the two were close friends. Nehemiah 13:28 indicates that there was a family relationship through marriage between one of Eliashib's son and the family of Sanballat, so Eliashib the priest seems to have been very friendly with the enemies of the Jews.

Well, what had Eliashib, the priest, done? He had made one of the chambers in the temple into an apartment for Tobiah. Verse 5 says that it was a "great chamber." That means it was very large, or very important. Probably it was the latter according to its former usage in connection with the work of the priests. This is confirmed in verse 5.

13:5 The room that was given to Tobiah, Israel's enemy and Nehemiah's enemy seems to have been the room where all of the supplies for the sacrifices were stored, the room also where the sacrifices were prepared for being placed on the altar. Actually this showed Eliashib's contempt not only for the Temple ministry which was his main responsibility, but also for Nehemiah, but worst of all, for the Lord. This could easily have been considered as a sin unto death.

13:6 Now all of this was going on while Nehemiah was in Susa (which may have been why Eliashib felt safe in doing this).

13:7 When Nehemiah got back, he saw "the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah. Note that Nehemiah in writing this record called it "evil." That means that it was sin. Sin is anything that is displeasing to God. It was sin for Eliashib to provide the chamber for Tobiah, and it was sin for Tobiah to take it. He probably did not live there permanently, but would stay there whenever he came to Jerusalem. And we know that he would never have come to Jerusalem if he had some evil thing to do against the people of God. Eliashib was really a traitor of the worst kind, and the priest aided him in what he intended to do whatever it may have been.

13:8 Nehemiah was very grieved at what Eliashib had done, and proceeded to throw all of Tobiah's stuff out of the chamber in the house of God. This shows that Nehemiah was still the governor, and although he must have known that there were others who would not have been offended by what Eliashib had done, Nehemiah knew that what he had done was abominable to God, he did not delay in doing what he could to correct what was wrong. Leaders are often in a position where they have to make what may be unpopular and hard decisions. Nehemiah was in such a place. He did not know how many sympathizers Eliashib might have had, but that was not a factor in what he did. He moved on the basis of what he knew was the will of God.

The Bible does not indicate what I am about to say, but Eliashib may have felt that by doing what he did for Tobiah, Tobiah may have had a change of heart toward the Jews in Jerusalem and may have made him become a friend instead of an enemy. But we never win by compromising with the truth, or with the enemies of God.

The righteous thing to do is always the right thing to do.

This is all that Nehemiah revealed about this unfortunate incident, and so we can assume that Nehemiah had no further trouble with either Tobiah or Eliashib.

But in verse 10 we are introduced to another problem in Israel that needed reform.

13:10 We have just considered a problem with the leadership of the people of Israel. Now we turn to a problem involving the Levites. But it was not that the Levites were doing the wrong thing. It was the people who were in disobedience. Because the work of the Levites was a full time ministry, the people were to provide for them so that they would not have to work to support themselves and their families. Consequently they, the Levites, “were fled every one to his field.” This means that those who lived outside of the city had left their work in the Temple, and had gone to their homes to raise the food that they are their families needed to survive. Consequently, the temple service of the Levites was not being done. The Levites assisted the priests, and so this was all effecting the fellowship of the people with God.

13:11 Nehemiah “contended with the rulers.” What the priests were forced to do, was not their fault; it was the responsibility of the priests to see that the people did what they were supposed to do in bringing their offerings to the temple to support the priests. It is easy to see that generally the spiritual condition of the whole nation was not good.

Note Nehemiah’s question. It was not, “Why are you not taking care of the Levites?” It was, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” Nehemiah was putting first things first. By not enforcing the Law with respect to the material and physical needs of the Levites, the spiritual needs of the nation were being neglected. This is why the gifts of the people was affecting the spiritual life of the nation. So, while bringing food and wine for the Levites was a material provision, they were spiritual gifts because they were enabling the Levites to carry on their work instead of having to spend their time supporting themselves.

This same principle carries over into the ministry of the Church as well. Paul wrote about this to the church of Corinth. I don’t want to get into this, this morning, but simply to point out the principle which Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 9:11-14:

11 If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?

12 If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ.

13 Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar?

14 Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.

Paul did not take advantage of this principle for himself. He evidently was supported by the Lord’s people independently. We know of some people who gave directly to him, and some churches which did the same. His epistle to the church at Phillipi was in many respects a “thank you” letter to the church that had been sent to him while he was in prison. Even pastors and missionaries are responsible to give. I understand that Hudson Taylor, who founded the China Inland Mission, gave as he was able to George Mueller who had those orphanages in Bristol, England, and George Mueller gave to Hudson Taylor. The Apostle Paul wrote about this for all of us in 2 Corinthians 9:7:

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.

Well, what happened to correct this problem at this time in Israel? Our answer is given in verses 12 and 13.

13:12 I would remind you that Malachi was one of the prophets who preached in Israel at this time, and among the many things that he touched on as he preached to a people who were inclined to keep as much as they could, and to give as little as they could. Let me remind you of what he said to the Jews at that time. Listen as I read to you from Malachi 3:7-12:

7 Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?

8 Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.

9 Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation.

10 Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.

11 And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts.

12 And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the Lord of hosts.

Derek Kidner brings out in his commentary that before the captivity the prophet Amos (in 4:4ff and 5:22) sought to bribe the Lord by their gifts, but now they were inclined to hang on to all that they could. But back in chapter 10 in making their covenant with the Lord, they had promised in vv. 33ff. that they would not neglect the priests or Levites, and yet that is what they had done. But when Nehemiah rebuked them, they began to bring into the house of God that which would meet the needs of the Levites and priests.

But Nehemiah did something else as we see in verse 13:

13:13 He appointed four treasurers to be over the treasuries, and it was their office “to distribute unto their brethren.” And, it was very probable that without these treasurers the people would not have continued to give very long. They were obligated by the Law to give. We are not. But the people of God who give cheerfully to the Lord for His work, are promised blessings which others will not receive. Many people give just to ease their conscience, but such gifts do not bring blessing. We are not told what lasting results followed Nehemiah’s rebuke.

13:14 Here we have the first of four ejaculatory prayers which are found in this final chapter of Nehemiah.

Kidner says that we are like intruders, or intruders, listening when we should quietly steal away. But let me read to you what Kidner says about this prayer. He did it far better than I could:

The memoirs become a person outpouring, and we are intruders. But Nehemiah’s private self is completely of a piece with his public one: singleminded, utterly frank, and godly through and through. If we cavil at his plea to be remembered, he could pronounce us too sophisticated, and the Gospels would support him. It springs from love, not self-love, as his tireless zeal for God has testified. To hear God’s ‘Well done’ is the most innocent and most cleansing of ambitions. Further, the plea springs from humility, not self-importance, for it is an appeal for help. God’s ‘rememberings’ always implies His intervention, not merely His recollection or recognition. Nehemiah is committing himself and his cause (cf. 29) to the only safe hands (p. 130).

And Dr. Kidner reminds us the Nehemiah’s words in his prayer, “my good deeds,” could be translated, “my acts of loyal love.”

His prayers in this chapter teach us that we need to pray for what we have done in serving the Lord just as much as we pray before we do the work. Perhaps if we did that, our works would be more fruitful.

13:15 Beginning with this verse, and going down through verse 22 we see how the people were doing to profane the Sabbath, *i.e.*, to make it like any other day of the week. The fourth commandment in the Law was, “Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy.” In Nehemiah’s prayers he was asking the Lord to remember his works; in the fourth commandment they were told to remember what God did on the sixth day of creation. Then was His work of creation finished. It is a special day in which the Jews were to remember God, and to cease from their works to do so, as God ceased from His work. It was complete. It was good. And it is a day to meditate much on what creation reveals about God – His power, His wisdom, His goodness.

But what was going on instead?

The Jews were doing business just like they did on the first six days of the week. Nehemiah rebuked them for what they were doing.

13:16 Also on the Sabbath, the men of Tyre, outsiders, came with their wares, and the Jews bought from them.

13:17 Again Nehemiah contended with them, calling what they were doing sin, and accusing them of profaning the Sabbath – serious charges before God against them.

13:18 Like so many other things they had done since their release from captivity, this was one of the main reasons that they had been taken into captivity.

13:19 Nehemiah took action by commanding that the gates should be closed before the sabbath, and not be opened until after the Sabbath. And then he set some of his servants as the gate to make sure that his orders were obeyed.

13:20 Once or twice merchants came and stayed through the Sabbath waiting for the gates to open.

13:21 So Nehemiah spoke to those mentioned in verse 20 and told them that if they came again, he would lay hands of them. So they didn’t come any more.

13:22 Then Nehemiah called the Levites, commanding them to cleanse themselves, to stand guard at the gates so as to make sure that the Sabbath Day was kept as a holy day, the way the Lord wanted it to be. If the day were to be holy, the Levites needed to be cleansed and holy too. So it was not just that the day was to be holy, but it would be holy if the people were holy too.

And this problem is settled as Nehemiah again asks the Lord to remember (and to preserve) what he had done. It was Nehemiah’s way of recognizing that all he did was not sufficient if he did not have the blessing of God, remember when he had done. So it was an expression of the need he saw for the Lord completing what he had started.

Finally, we come to the last of the problems, and it was not a new one.

13:23 One of the main commands that the Lord had given to His people before they ever got to the land was that they were not to intermarry with the inhabitants of the land. And yet the Jews did it anyway. And ever since they had gotten back to the land, this had been a constant problem with the Jews. Extra had to deal with it, and Nehemiah had to deal with it more than once. Now here, after the Temple was rebuilt, and after the walls of Jerusalem were up again, the people were resorting to this again. The men seemed to be the ones on this occasion who were mainly at fault.

13:24 The problem became so great that the children of these marriages, spoke the language of the heathen, and could not speak the language of the Jews.

This, of course, was an alarming situation. The prophet Malachi in his preaching to the Jews had said to them the Lord was seeking “a godly seed.” Nehemiah knew that the Lord was not just concerned about the generation of Jews who were alive at that time, but the Lord was concerned about how what was going on in the lives of the people of that generation, would affect the next generation, and then the next one after that, and on and on.

13:25 Notice that this is the third time we have the word “contended” to describe what Nehemiah did on three occasions. In verse 11 he contended with the rulers concerning the tithes. In verse 17 he contended with the nobles regarding the Sabbath. Here in verse 25 he contended with the men who had married heathen wives in open disregard and rebellion against the Law. In each instance Nehemiah was charging them with the violation of the will of God as expressed in the Word of God. There is no more serious change that can be brought against any person.

But why did the language problem cause such a response from Nehemiah here in verse 25?

Let me quote again from Derek Kidner on this subject. If as Malachi had preached that God was seeking “a godly seed,” then this ought to make the Jews concerned about how their generation was going to affect the next generation. For the children of these Jewish fathers who had married heathen wives, were growing up so that they could neither speak nor understand the language of the Jews, this should have given any serious father the greatest concern. This is how Derek Kidner expressed the problem:

The babble of languages among the children was not only a symptom but a threat: it meant a steady erosion of Israelite identity at the level of all thinking and expression, and a loss of access to the Word of God, which would effectually paganize them. A single generation’s compromise could undo the work of centuries (p. 131).

That statement made me think. We are living in very terrible times. We are headed down, and nobody knows how far we will go. It is no wonder that Nehemiah called a curse upon these men who had married heathen wives. It is no wonder that he struck them, and pulled out their hair, and made them swear that they would not let their children do what they had done. What oath did he want them to take before God? Read it at the end of verse 25: “Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves!”

We constantly hear expressions of anguish about how what is going on in our country is going to affect the lives of our children and our children’s children. And we ought to be concerned about that. I am concerned about that. But how much thought and prayer do we give to how our children and grandchildren are going to be affected as far as God is concerned. They are speaking a different language in our schools today from what they did when you and I were in school. Our universities are loaded with teachers and students who deny everything that is precious to us as a Christian. They speak English, but in another way it is a different language from what most of our parents spoke to us. If I did not believe in a sovereign God I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night. I can understand why Nehemiah did what he did to his fellow Jews. He knew that apart from the grace of God the existence of the nation of Israel would be in jeopardy. That is where things stand today. It is no wonder that Nehemiah did what he did to the men of his day. He was trying to wake them up to what was going on.

13:26 Solomon is a good example of the very danger that the Jews in Nehemiah’s day were facing. You would never think that a man who could write the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of

Solomon could ever end his life like he did. Nehemiah said, “Even him did outlandish women cause to sin.” “Outlandish” means *adulterous*. Nobody is free from temptation and sin until we get home to heaven.

13:27 The point that Nehemiah was making here was shall we listen to you and follow your example if someone like Solomon, who was far greater than any of you are from a spiritual point of view. He was telling the men of Israel that they were the ones who needed to listen to the Word and to what happened to a man like Solomon in order to be kept from doing, and ending his life so disastrously, lest they do the same.

13:28 In reading this verse, go back to verses 4 through 9 earlier in this chapter. Even men related to the priesthood . Nehemiah ran him off so that he would not contaminate others by the way he had violated the Word of God. It is not good even to be around a man who has shown such disregard for God and His Word.

13:29 Nehemiah’s third prayer after his strong stand for the truth of God’s Word.

13:30 It seems here that Nehemiah did what Ezra had done in making those who were in marriages with heathen spouses, caused them to leave their spouses.

13:31 Thus the priesthood was cleansed and the offerings resumed, followed by Nehemiah four prayer of this chapter, and the last prayer of the the book. In the records of heaven, Nehemiah is remembered for the goodness of God in his life, a true trophy of the grace of God.

The End