

# Comments on the Book of Nehemiah

by David E. Pratte

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Notes to the reader: I have chosen not to include the Bible text in these notes (please use your Bible to follow along). Instead, I have divided the notes by groups of verses; each group of verses begins with a numbered study question or questions for you to consider. The abbreviation “**b/c/v**” means “book, chapter, and verse.” Also, when I ask the reader to refer to a map, please consult the maps at the back of your Bible or in a Bible dictionary.

## Introduction to the Book of Nehemiah

### Background of the Book

Note: To learn the background of Nehemiah, please see the study questions on Ezra.  
1. Skim the book of Nehemiah and summarize its theme.

#### **Theme**

Ezra and Nehemiah give the historical accounts of the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity. Nehemiah describes the return of the third group from captivity and the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem.

#### **Period of Bible History**

Restoration from captivity (click on the link to see a timeline of Bible periods: [www.gospelway.com/commentary](http://www.gospelway.com/commentary)).

#### **Author**

Generally believed to be Ezra, but could be Nehemiah.

#### **Summary of book by sections:**

Chap. 1-7 – Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem

Chap. 8-13 – Spiritual restoration of the people

#### **Contemporary prophets**

Malachi

#### **Recommended Reference Work**

*A Remnant Shall Return*, Bob and Sandra Waldron, 1996

#### **Historical Setting**

Events in Ezra and Nehemiah occurred during the period of the Jews’ return from Babylonian captivity. When the Babylonians had captured Jerusalem and overthrown the nation of Judah, they took the Jews into captivity away from Palestine into Babylon (see 2 Chronicles

36:11-21). But the Medes and Persians later overthrew the Babylonians and began a policy of allowing the Jews to return to Palestine.

There were actually three groups that returned. The first group returned in 536 BC under leadership of Zerubbabel, the second group in 458 BC led by Ezra, and the third group in 445 BC led by Nehemiah.

Consider the history of the period according to the reigns of several great Persian kings (see Chart):

**Cyrus** — He overthrew Babylon in 538 BC. The first group of Jews returned to Palestine under Zerubbabel's leadership in 536 BC.

**Darius the "Great"** — During his lifetime, the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt.

**Xerxes** — This is the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. He eventually chose Esther as his queen, and by her influence he saved the Jews from destruction.

**Artaxerxes** — This man was son of Xerxes and stepson of Esther. He ruled from about 465-423 BC. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written during his reign.

Ezra's record begins with the first group that returned under Cyrus. But Ezra himself became personally involved in the story during the 7th year of the reign of Araxerxes, when Ezra led a group of Jews back to Palestine (458 BC). In the 21st year of the reign, Nehemiah led another group of Jews to return, and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

### Practical Lessons

In many ways, the time of Ezra and Nehemiah was like our own. God's people had been in apostasy, which led to the Babylonian captivity. Some leaders had begun the work of restoring the people to God's service, but there were still many problems and the people continued to fall into sin. The task of Ezra and Nehemiah was to provide leadership to continue the restoration and to challenge the people to spiritual faithfulness.

Similarly under the New Testament, after the first century, God's church went into apostasy resulting in the Catholic and Protestant churches. In our age, God's people have sought to return to God and to restore the church. But there are still many problems, and God's people often continue to fall into sin. Strong and faithful leaders are needed to continue the restoration and to challenge God's people to spiritual faithfulness.

We can learn many practical lessons from the problems Ezra and Nehemiah faced and how they dealt with them by God's help.

### Review Notes on Nehemiah

As you study the book of Nehemiah, be sure to understand and remember all the material listed below.

**1. Know the 15 periods of Bible history, and the events that mark the beginning and end of each period. Know in which period Nehemiah lived. (See the chart at [www.gospelway.com/commentary/bible\\_timeline.pdf](http://www.gospelway.com/commentary/bible_timeline.pdf)).**

**2. Know the theme of Nehemiah. Know his occupation.**

**3. Steps to useful service to God, as shown by Nehemiah's example:**

- a. Care & desire to see God's work prosper.
- b. Ask God's help in prayer and be sure your intentions are pleasing to Him.
- c. Respect properly ordained authority.
- d. Determine what action is needed, and develop a plan of action.
- e. Motivate people to work.
- f. Resist opposition.
- g. Rebuke sin among God's people.
- h. Be willing to make personal sacrifices and set a good example.
- i. Teach God's word and encourage people to worship Him.

- j. Lead people to recognize their sin and repent of it.
- k. Lead people to commit themselves to obey God's will.
- l. Remind people of their commitment to God, and rebuke disobedience.

#### **4. *Methods of opposition to God's work, and how to deal with them, as shown by Nehemiah's example***

(Note: be able to name the 3 men that led the opposition against Nehemiah):

- a. Mockery & discouragement — Handle this by appealing to God, trusting and praying to Him; rebuke the opponents; keep working.
- b. Threats of warfare/attacks — Handle this by appealing to God, organizing people to fight evil, always be on guard, and keep working.
- c. Offers to meet and compromise — Handle this by refusing to compromise or to meet if it hinders the work; keep working.
- d. Accusations of self-serving motives — Handle this by denying the accusations, point out the lack of proof, appeal to God, and keep working.
- e. Attempts to cause fear or encourage sin that will discredit workers — Handle this by refusing to violate God's word, consider the influence of your conduct, trust God, and keep working.
- f. Attempts to weaken opposition to error by means of compromising people — Handle this by keeping working.

#### **5. *How to deal with sin among God's people, as shown by Nehemiah's example:***

- a. Be concerned enough to see the need for change.
- b. Think carefully and determine a Scriptural plan of action.
- c. Confront people who sinned and call on them to repent.
- d. Discuss the error before an assembly of God's people.
- e. Present the evidence on which you base your conclusions.
- f. Offer a Scriptural solution.
- g. Expect people to repent, make restitution, and bring forth fruits of repentance.
- h. Reach a definite plan of reconciliation, and expect all parties to do as promised.

#### **6. *Neh. 9 describes the following characteristics of the Israelites, as demonstrated by the works listed below:***

Characteristics: Pride, Stubbornness, Disobedience, Ungratefulness

Works: Refused to enter Canaan, Golden calf

#### **7. *Neh. 9 describes the following characteristics of God.***

These characteristics are demonstrated by the works of God that are also listed:

Characteristics: Power, Wisdom, Uniqueness (one God), Righteousness, Faithfulness to promises, Love, care, & concern, Justice, Guidance & authority, Grace, mercy, & forgiveness,

Works: Provision for His people, Creation of universe, Preservation of universe, Covenant with Abraham, Plagues on Egypt, Crossing of Red Sea, Pillar of cloud/fire, Giving of the law, Food & water for Israel, Israel made a great nation, Israel given Canaan

#### **8. *The cycle of Israel's relationship to God, as described in Neh. 9, can be illustrated as follows:***

Sin then Deliverance then Defeat then Repentance (repeat)

#### **9. *The following steps are illustrated in Neh. 8-13 as necessary steps in spiritual conversion and restoration:***

- a. Study and learn God's law (chap. 8). (Note the methods used to study God's law. Also remember the people's attitude in learning. Note that the people were able to understand God's will

and restore their relationship to God by following a message written hundreds of years earlier.)

- b. Recognize and confess God's goodness and man's sinfulness (chap. 9).
- c. Make a commitment to obey God's word (chap. 10).
- d. Follow through and practice the obedience that was committed (chap. 13).

**10. Neh. 13 lists 4 specific ways that the Jews had violated their covenant to serve God, and/or had disobeyed God's law:**

- a. Tobiah's personal possessions were kept in the temple chamber.
- b. The Levites' provisions had not been given to them.
- c. People were working and doing business on the sabbath.
- d. People were inter-marrying with those who were not God's people.

## Part 1: Rebuilding of the Walls of Jerusalem - Chap. 1-7

### I. Nehemiah Learns the Conditions in Jerusalem - Chap. 1

#### Notes on Nehemiah 1

Verse 1

- 2. When and where did events in this book begin?
- 3. List and explain Old Testament Scriptures that these Jews violated.

#### **Introduction to the man Nehemiah**

The book is introduced as the words of Nehemiah, son of Hachaliah. This could mean, either that he wrote the book, or that the story records his life and words but someone else actually recorded it. Many people believe Ezra wrote the book, because it is so similar to his writings. But it is spoken in the first person as though Nehemiah himself is speaking.

Little is known of Nehemiah except what is written in this book. He was apparently recognized as an important person in many ways. He had the serious responsibility of being the king's cupbearer (see on v11). The Persian king readily named him governor of Judea (10:1). So, like Daniel and Esther, he was a Jew who became prominent in the nation of his captivity. Nothing is known for sure about his father Hachaliah.

The story begins in the month Chislev in the 20<sup>th</sup> year. 2:1 shows this means the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Persian king Artaxerxes (see chart). The Waldrons state that Artaxerxes started to reign in 465BC, so these events would have taken place beginning in 445 BC. Artaxerxes had been king when Ezra brought his group of exiles back to Judah in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of the king (Ezra 7:1,8). So it was 13 years from the time Ezra brought his group to Judah till the time Nehemiah's story began.

Nehemiah served in Shushan, the palace of the king of Persia. This was the same place where Esther earlier had lived and served as queen in the book of Esther (Esther 1:2). Remember that events in the book of Nehemiah actually occurred after the events in the book of Esther (see introduction).

## Step#1 to Useful Service to God: Really Care and Desire To See God's Work and God's People Prosper.

Verses 2,3

3. Who gave Nehemiah information about people in Jerusalem? What did he say about them?
4. Application: List some distresses that God's people today have faced in recent years.

### *Nehemiah's brother reported conditions in Jerusalem*

Nehemiah received a visit from Hanani who is identified as one of his brothers (cf. 7:2) who came with other men from Judah. At this time two groups of Jews had returned to Judah from captivity (see introduction). Apparently some of these came back for a visit to their relatives in Shushan.

Nehemiah asked these men about the welfare of the Jews who had returned from captivity to Jerusalem. This question led to a discussion that informed Nehemiah about the problems in Judah, which in turn introduces the theme of the book.

The visitors informed Nehemiah that the remnant of the people in Jerusalem were facing severe problems. They were in distress and reproach. The city wall was broken down and the gates burned with fire. The Babylonians had done this when they overthrew the city (2 Kings 25:8-10; 2 Chron. 36:19; Jer. 52:12-14). There is no record that repairs had been made to the wall by the first two groups that had returned. If they had attempted repairs, they did not complete the work and whatever work they had done had fallen into disrepair again. Remember, it had been 90 years since the first group had returned.

The subsequent story will help us understand the significance of this problem. But cities in those days needed walls for protection from enemies. Also a destroyed wall symbolized a city in defeat and desolation (cf. 2:17).

We will see that these problems deeply grieved Nehemiah. This was a time of restoration and rebuilding the nation that had fallen because of apostasy. The Jews had returned to rebuild the city and restore the nation. But Nehemiah was grieved by the evidence that they were so far from achieving that goal.

### *God's people in our own day also face serious needs.*

The problems the Jews faced in Nehemiah's day had begun because of their apostasy from God's way. Some restoration had occurred, but there were still problems and challenges. Likewise, many problems have occurred because people have departed from God's plan for the New Testament.

Much has been done to restore the service of God among His true people, though many who claim to serve Him yet remain in apostasy. But even among those who have come so far in the restoration, there remain many problems to be dealt with: worldliness, neglect of God's work, divorce and remarriage, perversion of church organization and work, sexual laxity (immodesty, dancing), immoral entertainment, humanism, family problems, lack of dedicated leaders, profanity, smoking, drinking, lack of Bible study and prayer, and negligence in spreading the gospel.

Some congregations of God's people are doing fairly well in these areas, but in many congregations the wall is broken down and the gates have been burned. What is our reaction? Consider Nehemiah's reaction when he learned of the problems in Judah.

Verse 4

5. How did Nehemiah react to this news (v4)? (Think: Why would he react this way?)

### *Nehemiah's reaction to the news of problems among God's people*

When Nehemiah heard the condition of God's people, he wept and mourned, fasted, and prayed to God. This continued for "many days," not just a few minutes. Note that fasting was an expression of his sorrow and grief, associated with prayer to God (cf. on Ezra 8:21; 9:3ff; 10:1ff).

We too should be concerned and troubled when we see God's people are in trouble. We should not just overlook it or shake our heads and go about our business. We should be truly sad to know the problems and weaknesses that exist in the lives of members. We should go to God in prayer for His help. And we should grieve to the point of seeking to work to overcome the problems.

How much does it bother you to see problems and spiritual failings in the lives of God's people?

## **Step #2 In Useful Service to God: Seek God's Help in Prayer and Be Sure Our Intentions Please Him.**

Verse 5

6. How did he begin his prayer to God (v5)? What can we learn about prayer from this?

### ***Nehemiah's prayer***

The following verses summarize Nehemiah's prayer after he heard of the distress of the Jews in Jerusalem. The record gives a good lesson on the content of prayer.

#### **Praise to God**

Nehemiah honored God as the God of heaven, the great and awesome God. He keeps His covenant and shows mercy to those who love Him and keep His commands.

The God of the Bible is the one true God, ruler of heaven and earth. He deserves our worship and praise. He keeps His word and respects His promises. When He agrees to do a thing, we can trust Him to do it. When covenants are broken, we can be sure that it is man who has broken them, not God.

God has mercy and loving kindness toward men. He cares what happens to us. But we benefit from His love conditionally: we must love Him and keep His commands. Such a God gives us a reason to pray and hope that He will answer.

Our prayers should not just make requests for things we want for ourselves. We should also express praise for God's greatness. This praise was especially appropriate because Nehemiah was about to ask God to do the thing he just praised God for: to keep His covenant and show mercy on His people.

Verses 6,7

7. How did he describe the conduct of the Israelites in vv 6,7? List **passages** showing that we too need to confess our sins to God.

#### **Confession of sin**

Having praised God, Nehemiah then begged Him to open His eyes, be attentive, and hear the prayer Nehemiah was about to offer. He said he was in prayer day and night about this matter. Note the frequency and duration of prayer: night and day over a period of many days – v4 (not just a few hours a week whenever the church is meeting).

Nehemiah prayed on behalf of God's servants, the children of Israel, not just for something he wanted for himself. He prayed for others, the whole nation in this case.

He then confessed and acknowledged the sins of the people. Israel had sinned; Nehemiah and his family had sinned. He openly admits their corrupt conduct toward God, that they had not kept God's commands, statutes, and ordinances given through Moses. Cf. Ezra 10:1; Neh.9:2; Dan. 9:20.

Today we are obligated to keep, not Moses' law, but Jesus' law in the gospel. Nevertheless, we must confess when we sin under the gospel (see Matt. 6:12; Luke 18:9-14; Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9).

Verses 8,9

8. What promise did Nehemiah recall in vv 8,9? Where else is this recorded?
9. Special Assignment: Had God kept these promises? How do you know? What can we learn about God's promises?

### **Claims on God's promises**

Nehemiah then reminded God of His promises to Israel. Through Moses God had commanded Israel that He would scatter them among the nations if they were unfaithful. But if they would then repent and keep His commands, He would gather them and bring them back to the land chosen as His dwelling place – no matter where they were scattered, He could and would do this. Moses wrote this in Lev. 26:14,15,33,39; Deut. 4:25-31; 28:15,36,63-67; 30:1-10.

God had truly kept His word in this. The people had been unfaithful and He surely had scattered them across the world for those sins. Now Nehemiah was urging God to keep the second part of the promise: to return the people when they repented and bless them again in the land.

Likewise, God has made plain promises to us under the gospel, and we have every right to claim those promises in prayer. He has promised forgiveness of sins, the hope of eternal life, strength to overcome temptation, blessings in raising our families, etc. We have every right to believe God will keep His promises in these matters if we live to serve Him.

Verses 10,11

10. What occupation did Nehemiah have? What request did he make in his prayer?
11. Special Assignment: An ongoing assignment as we study this book will be to list principles of useful service to God followed by Nehemiah. List two principles you can find in this chapter.

### **Requests for God's help in His service**

Nehemiah then reminded God that he was making request on behalf of God's own servants, the people He had redeemed by His mighty power. He was not making request on his own behalf. Here is another lesson for us: we surely may pray for things we ourselves need, but we should also remember to pray for the needs of others, especially God's people.

Nehemiah again called on God to hear his prayer and the prayer of others who feared Him. He then came to the specific point of his prayer. He wanted God to bless and prosper him in his effort to make request of the king. At this point we are not told exactly what request he wanted to make; however, the next chapter immediately reveals that Nehemiah wanted the king to empower him to go back to help the Jews with the problems Nehemiah had heard about. We are not even told exactly what "man" it was that he wanted mercy in his eyes. However, this is clearly hinted at by telling us Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king.

Note that we likewise need to pray to God for the things that are truly important in life, especially for His blessings on our work for Him. We should realize that our strength and success comes from Him, and we will prosper only if we have His blessings. Without Him we can do nothing. When we see problems in our families or in the church, we should be willing to work to meet the need. But we must also seek God's blessings in prayer.

### ***Nehemiah's occupation: cupbearer to the king***

Finally, the chapter tells us Nehemiah's occupation: he was the cupbearer to the king. This was not a trivial job: carrying around a cup. It was a serious responsibility, like current security police who work to protect the president. The cupbearer's job was to make sure that no one poisoned the king. He was to constantly supervise all that the king drank to be sure no harm came to him.

As cupbearer, Nehemiah was a very trusted servant. He would also be a constant companion to the king, present or at least nearby every time the king drank anything (cf. chap. 2). The effect would be to even give him access to the king as a friend or possibly even a counselor.

## Notes on Nehemiah 2

### II. Nehemiah Returns and Organizes the Work – Chap. 2,3

#### Step 3 in Useful Service to God: Where Possible, Obtain Permission and Assistance from People in Authority

Verses 1-3

1. How did Nehemiah describe his work (v1)? What did the king observe and say to him?
2. What concern did Nehemiah express in response?

#### *The king asks Nehemiah about his trouble.*

The events recorded here occurred in the month Nisan in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was serving wine to the king, as his work required (1:11). Note that “wine” in the Bible does not always mean fermented or intoxicating wine, as the term generally implies today. See Isaiah 16:10; Jeremiah 48:33; Isaiah 65:8; Genesis 40:9-11; Revelation 19:15.

Nehemiah had not in the past been sad or sorrowful in disposition, when he was in the presence of the king. However, on this occasion he appeared to be sad, and the king noticed it and asked the cause. He knew Nehemiah was not physically ill, so he concluded it was sorrow of heart. He was upset in mind. See Proverbs 15:13.

This gave Nehemiah the opportunity he had been praying for to ask the king’s help (1:11). But when the time came, Nehemiah was beset by great fear. Note that serving God is not always easy or without emotional hardship. The record helps us see Nehemiah’s emotions. First, he had great sorrow when he heard of the troubles in Jerusalem. Now he had great fear before the king. Those who please God are not those who manage to avoid facing emotional fears and griefs, but those who conquer them to do God’s will despite the hardships.

The account does not directly state why Nehemiah was fearful, but if we would put ourselves in his place we can see several reasons why we might be fearful. He was about to make a great request of the greatest ruler on the face of the earth. One would not lightly enter such a request. There was the possibility that the king could become so angry he could punish Nehemiah. Or at the least he could deny the request and demand that Nehemiah stay in Shushan and not leave. In any case, the possibilities were so important to Nehemiah that he feared for the result. Waldron also says that it was improper for servants of the king to allow their personal lives to affect their service and demeanor before the king, but Nehemiah’s sorrow had become obvious.

#### *Nehemiah makes his request of the king.*

Nehemiah responded first by expressing great respect for the king. He said, “Let the king live forever!” This is similar to the modern expression, “Long live the king!” This was a common expression for praising the king. It showed people valued the king and wanted his service as king to continue (though of course no one physically lives forever in the absolute sense). See 1 Kings 1:31; Daniel 2:4; 5:10; 6:6,21. Wisdom would teach us to speak respectfully to people in positions of power, especially when we have a great request to make of them.

Nehemiah then explained that it was only reasonable for him to be troubled considering the problems in his homeland. The city where his fathers had lived and been buried now lay in waste and its gates consumed by fire (see notes on 1:3,4). This was Nehemiah’s concern, so he used the opportunity to honestly speak to the king about it.



Verses 4-8

3. What did the king ask (v4)?
4. What did Nehemiah do before answering? What response did he make to the king? (Think: What do we learn about prayer?)
5. When the king asked for details, what further request did Nehemiah make (vv 7,8)? How did the king respond?

### ***The king listens to Nehemiah' request.***

The king was clearly a perceptive, wise king. He knew Nehemiah sought the king's help regarding this matter, so he asked what Nehemiah wanted.

Before answering, Nehemiah offered another prayer to God. Note the importance of prayer in Nehemiah's service to God. He had already prayed many days about this (see 1:4ff). Now he had a receptive response from the king, but he knew he needed greater help than that of the king. So he went to God in prayer. It could not have been a long prayer, and probably was not spoken out loud, since he was in the king's presence and had to give an answer. Yet his prayer shows the need for seeking God's help, especially in important works we seek to do for Him. We should imitate such examples. (1 John 5:14,15; 3:21,22; James 5:16; Matthew 7:7-11; 18:19; 1 Peter 5:7; John 14:13,14; cf. 1 Samuel 1:10-28; 7:5-11; 2 Kings 20:1-7; 2 Chronicles 7:11-14).

### ***Nehemiah made several requests***

(1) First, he asked the king for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. This request, of course, was his response to the information he had received in chap. 1 about the serious problems the city faced. We are told that the queen was also present on this occasion.

The king, as would be appropriate before making such a decision, asked for specifics. He wanted to know how long the trip would take and when Nehemiah would return. Note that he assumed Nehemiah would want to return.

We are then expressly told that the king was favorable to Nehemiah's request and granted it. Nehemiah set a time (apparently for when he would leave). He had evidently thought this out well ahead of time, and he had a specific plan to propose.

Nehemiah's plan, however, involved yet more requests of the king.

(2) Next he asked for letters to the governors in the territory that he would pass through, giving him authority to travel to Judah. Since the entire area was subject to the king of Persia, the local governors would be required to cooperate with Nehemiah and not cause him trouble, if he had letters of authority from the king. ("Beyond the river" probably refers to the territories on the other side of the Euphrates – see NKJV footnote.)

(3) Nehemiah's third request was for a letter to a man named Asaph, who supervised the forests of the king. Nehemiah wanted this man to be required to provide the timber that would be needed to rebuild the city gates and wall of Jerusalem and a house for Nehemiah himself. We will see that the house was not just for Nehemiah's benefit, but he was very generous in caring for others (see on chap. 5).

The king was favorable and granted all Nehemiah's requests. But Nehemiah gave thanks to God for this favorable result. He had repeatedly made request of God for these blessings, so it was only right that he then give God credit when the blessings were granted. We should remember this too in our prayers to God.

## Step #4 in Useful Service: Develop a Plan of Action

Verses 9,10

6. What did Nehemiah do when he had arrived? Who was unhappy and why? (Think: Why would such men be disturbed?)

### *Nehemiah returns to Judah.*

Nehemiah says nothing about the journey from Persia to Judah. However, the third group of Jews at this point returned to Judah under the leadership of Nehemiah.

He immediately proceeds to discuss the activities after his return. He first delivered to the governors of the region the letters that the king had given him. This would show them the authority for his work.

In addition, though the record does not mention Nehemiah's request for such help, the king had sent captains and horsemen in the army with him.

### *The beginning of opposition*

As in the book of Ezra, when God's people begin to work effectively for Him, you can be sure there will be opposition. These verses introduce the villains of the story. They are Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite. Later accounts include Geshem the Arabian (see 2:19; 4:1). These men were greatly upset that someone had come to help the Israelites with their problems.

We may wonder why anyone would oppose efforts to help the Jews. The answer, of course, is that these men were all enemies of the Jews. Nehemiah 4:2 tells us that Sanballat was with the army of Samaria. This meant he was part of the mixed breed of Samaritans who had been brought into the land by the Assyrians after they removed the northern tribes of Israel into captivity. As such, they were not real Israelites and had no inheritance in Israel (2:20). Their worship to God was a perversion, which professed to serve God but included idol worship. See notes on Ezra 4:1-3 to see how the first group of returning exiles had forbidden these false worshipers to participate with them in building the temple.

Tobiah was an Ammonite. The Ammonites were descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot. They lived near the desert east of the Jordan River. Geshem was an Arab. The Arabians have not been mentioned much in the Old Testament and appear to have traveled from place to place without settling in any one area. By this time, however, at least some of these people must have lived in or near the area of Jerusalem. So they were not happy to see the Jews prosper.

All three of these men apparently had some local authority. The fact they are mentioned immediately after Nehemiah reported to the governors may imply they were among the governors. Otherwise, they soon heard the news from Nehemiah's meeting with the governors. We will see the problems they caused as the story progressed and how Nehemiah and the Jews dealt with them.

Verses 11,12

7. What did Nehemiah do after three days? When did he do it?

### *Nehemiah observes the wall.*

Having arrived in Jerusalem, Nehemiah waited three days. Then he went out at night to view the wall. He took a few men with him, but he had not yet told anyone of his intentions. He did not even take an animal except the one he rode on.

A principle of good leadership is that, before one begins he must develop a plan. He must know exactly what work needs to be done. What needs exist, and what problems can be expected? Then one must determine where to start and how to proceed.

Too often people jump into a project without having thought it through. They are disorganized, have no plan, and have set no priorities. This often leads to discouragement and failure. Nehemiah began by inspecting the situation so he could formulate a plan.

Verses 13-15

8. What did he learn about the condition of the wall? (Think: Why was this important?)

### ***A summary of the areas Nehemiah viewed.***

He went out by night through the Valley Gate then to the Serpent Well (Jackal's Well – ASV). Then he went to the Refuse or Dung Gate. From there he went to the Fountain Gate then to the King's pool. Exactly where all these points were in the wall, I do not know.

But as he went, he viewed the condition of the wall and the gates. We are told little except that, at the King's pool there was no room for the animal to pass. Presumably this is told to indicate that the rubble was so bad it was impassable for his animal.

Then he returned to the Valley Gate by which he had begun.

### **Step #5 in Useful Service: Motivate People to Work**

Verses 16-18

9. Whom did he tell regarding his purpose? What did he propose to do?

10. What did he say to motivate the people? How did they respond?

11. Application: What lessons can we learn about the church today?

### ***Nehemiah describes the problem to the Jewish leaders.***

The other officials of the Jews knew nothing about Nehemiah's plan. He had told them nothing of his purpose nor of his investigation of the wall. At this point, however, he met with them and explained to them his plan.

First he challenged them by describing the problem they faced. He talked about the distress they faced because the city was still laid waste (specifically referring to the wall), and the gates had been burned (see on 1:3). The people, of course, knew this. But sometimes people live with a situation so long they fail to see the seriousness of the problem. They had done little or nothing about it for years, so Nehemiah had to begin by motivating them to see how bad things were so they would want to do something about it.

He urged them to build the wall so they would no longer be a reproach. The wall was a source of protection, but to be without the wall was also a reminder to them and everyone else that they were a defeated, fallen, and defenseless nation. The city had been destroyed because of their sin. To restore the wall would indicate a restoration of their favor with God and of their commitment as a nation to work for Him.

Likewise, Jesus' church often faces difficult situations. Sometimes we have internal problems. Sometimes we are just few in number or have few members that are mature and committed. Sometimes we face doctrinal strife, immorality among the members, or just general ignorance and indifference. Sometimes the problem is just that there are so many lost souls around us in need of hearing the truth. In any case, the members need to be motivated to work, and one way to do so is to describe to them honestly the problems they face.

### ***He tells them of the advantages they have and urges them to work.***

He then told the people of the good that had already been accomplished. God had blessed Nehemiah so the king had given permission for the work. Note that Nehemiah continues to give God the credit. In order for the work to prosper, the people needed the provisions the king offered as well as the authority to do the work. Nehemiah had already obtained this.

Note that Nehemiah motivated the people by telling the good as well as the bad. He told of the work that needed to be done, but he also gave them reason to believe they could do it. We need to do the same in motivating ourselves to work for God. Yes, we often face great problems. But let us not be discouraged but trust in God to provide what we need to accomplish His work. He can give the victory if we will use what He provides.

The people responded with a will to work. They said, "Let us rise up and build!" They then strengthened their hands for the work. That is, they made the necessary preparations. They did not just talk about it, but they immediately proceeded to do what was needed to accomplish the job. This is exactly the attitude that God's people need today.

Note that sometimes people are able to do a work for the Lord and would be willing to do so, if they simply have good leadership to challenge them. This job had been waiting for years to be done. When the challenge was presented, they responded. What was lacking was dedicated leadership. We should also remember this need today.

### **Step #6 in Useful Service: Resist Opposition**

Verses 19,20

12. How did the opponents attempt to hinder the work? How did Nehemiah respond?

13 Special Assignment: What lessons can we learn from this chapter about useful service to God?

#### ***First attempt at opposition: Ridicule, mockery, and intimidation***

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had been unfavorable to the Jew's project since they first heard of it (v10). These verses reveal the beginning of their active efforts to frustrate the work.

As with most enemies, their first attempt was to discourage the work by speaking against it. They laughed at the people and expressed their hatred and spite. Then they implied that the action constituted rebellion against the king. This would have been a serious charge, if true. We remember that such a charge had caused a halt in the work on the temple in Ezra 4.

Likewise today, when we attempt to seriously restore the Lord's church according to His standard, people often ridicule us and tell us we cannot possibly succeed. They express hatred, hoping that simply their expressions of disapproval will discourage us to the point we give up the attempt. They call us Campbellites, antis, Bible-beaters, orphan-haters, etc. They accuse us of believing in water salvation, salvation by works, not following the spirit of Jesus, judging others, etc.

Note that these statements, both in Nehemiah's case and in our case today, are made without proof. Often no attempt is made whatever to prove them. There was no evidence the people were rebelling against the king. On the contrary, they had express authority from the king to do exactly as they were doing. Likewise, we have Bible authority for our teaching and practice. But people hope that just the accusations will be enough to discourage God's people till we quit. Or at least they hope to discredit us and prejudice others against us, so they will not join with us but will join the opposition against us. People do not like to be ridiculed, and often such tactics lead at least some people to refuse to work for God.

See Matthew 5:10-12; 13:21; 27:27-31,39-44; Luke 6:22,23; John 15:20; 16:33; Acts 14:22; Romans 5:3; 8:17-39; 2 Corinthians 1:4-10; 4:17; 7:4; 2 Timothy 3:12; Hebrews 10:32-36; 1 Peter 2:19-23; 3:14-18; 4:1,15-19; 5:10

#### ***Nehemiah's response to the ridicule***

Such ridicule and spite needs to be responded to, at least at first (cf. chap. 6) and at least to the people of God, so they will not be discouraged by it.

Nehemiah responded that God would prosper the Jews in their work, so they would proceed with the work trusting in Him. People may ridicule and say it cannot be done, but if we are on God's side, He will provide what we need.

Then Nehemiah argued that these enemies had no portion, right, or memorial in Jerusalem. In short, this was not their job. They had no right to be involved in it anyway, so why should the people pay any attention to them? They were not really Jews, but were people of other nations. Their service to God was a perversion, so the Jews would not allow them to participate in the

work even if they had wanted to do so. See notes on Ezra 4:3,4 (cf. Neh. 4:2). In essence, Nehemiah was saying it was “none of their business.”

We must always remember whom we work for, whom we seek to please, and who is the source of our strength. If we work for people or to please people, such as these enemies, then it might make sense to quit if they are displeased by our work. But if they are not the ones we seek to please, if they ultimately have no power over us, and if they are not involved in the work anyway, why should we care what they think or say? Why should their opinions alter our work?

Too often we are unduly influenced by people who have no right to influence us. They will not ultimately be our judges. They will not determine our reward. They cannot ultimately bless or punish us. We are working for Someone far greater and more important, Who can give us a true reward. We must ignore those feeble humans who oppose us and determine instead to please the One who is our Master, Judge, and source of our eternal reward. Acts 5:29; Heb. 13:5,6.

### Notes on Nehemiah 3

Verses 1-32

1. What information is recorded in chap. 3?
2. What is said regarding the nobles in v5?
3. Application: What is the point of recording the information in this chapter? What lessons can we learn?

#### *The assignments of the workers*

This chapter describes the labor of various groups who worked to rebuild the wall. Various people are named and their areas of labor are described. The description begins at the Sheep Gate, then moves section by section around the wall till it returns again to the Sheep Gate (cf. vv 1,32).

The only information worth special observation is v5, which says that some of the nobles did not put their necks to the work of the Lord. This appears to be a rebuke. Prosperous people often expect other people to work while they do as they please. They seem to think they are above menial labor. But this was a work for all to do, both for their own protection and for the good of the nation. Above all, it was a work God wanted done. We should all learn to work for the Lord without excuses.

#### *Value of this information*

One may wonder why these details are recorded in Scripture. Surely such details are not necessary for us to know in order to be saved, so why did God include them? We may not know for sure all the reasons why, but here are some benefits the information has:

1) It demonstrates the **historical** nature of the record. Naming specific people and specific places where they worked, especially with such detailed descriptions, serves no purpose whatever unless the account is intended to be taken as history. This confirms that we should view the record as historic fact.

2) It shows that the work was done in an **organized** manner. This shows us the value of working for God in an organized way. Everyone should be given work to do, and each one should know what is expected of them.

3) It helps us appreciate the magnitude of the job.

4) It gives recognition and appreciation to the laborers. Each of them is permanently recorded by name in God’s word.

There may someday be other value to the record that we cannot now foresee. Perhaps the description will someday be verified by archaeologists or will serve some other purpose in confirming Scripture.

In any case, God chose to record these people and their work for the sake of future information.

## Notes on Nehemiah 4

### III. Enemies Oppose the Work – Chap. 4

Verses 1-3

1. How did Sanballat react to the work on the wall?
2. What did the enemies attempt in order to discourage the work? What did Sanballat and Tobiah say?
3. Application: What are some things people say to discourage God's people today?

The opposition of Sanballat and his companions had begun in chap. 2. When they had heard of the work, they had mocked and ridiculed. In this chapter the opposition continued and significantly intensified. We will see how Nehemiah and the Jews dealt with it. From their example, we can learn important lessons about how we today should deal with the opposition we face in service to God. See notes on Ezra 4.

God's people have always faced opposition in their work for God. People are rarely truly neutral about God and His true work. Either they support and defend it, or they oppose it. The methods of opposition are similar from generation to generation, so we can learn from the examples here.

#### A. First Method of Opposition: Mockery and Discouragement

##### *Sanballat's anger and ridicule*

Sanballat had been introduced in 2:10,19. He had been upset to hear that Nehemiah had come to work for the benefit of the Jews. Here he became even more angry as he heard the work on the wall had actually begun and was progressing.

His first effort to prevent the work had been mockery and attempts to discourage the work (2:19). Here he continued those tactics but in more extreme forms. He evidently hoped that he could discourage the Jews from succeeding by mocking their efforts and reminding them of the enormity of the task they faced.

He appeared with his brethren, the army of Samaria. This shows that Sanballat was a Samaritan, part of the people that the Assyrians had moved into the area after they removed the Israelites. Intermarriage with various other people had made them a mixed race. In any case, they had no real inheritance in Israel (see on 2:10).

Sanballat began taunting the Israelites that they were too feeble to do the job they had begun. He points out the greatness of the task. Did they think they were strong enough to build fortifications? Were they able to make sacrifices? Did they think they had begun a job that could be completed easily with little work, like a one-day job? He pointed out the heaps of rubbish that stood in their way, much of which had been burned. Did they think they could raise stone walls from the rubbish. This turned out to be a real concern (see 4:10).

No doubt all these were real problems, and Nehemiah and the Jews had surely considered them. But Sanballat's intent appears to be to discourage the workers by convincing them they could never complete so great a task, so why bother to try?

##### *Tobiah joins the ridicule.*

Tobiah then joined the mockery by saying the wall the Jews built was so feeble that it would fall down if a fox or jackal stepped on it. This was obviously an exaggeration, but the purpose was to make the people think their work was not worthwhile. He hoped they would view the effort as not being worth the attempt.

### ***We face similar ridicule today.***

People attempt to discourage us saying how small and weak our efforts are. The church is small and many people disagree with us. We are a minority opposing large churches with powerful hierarchies and wealthy organizations. We have no political power, no wealth, no influential members, and no seminary-trained preachers, so how can we succeed?

But remember, if people really thought it was impossible for us to succeed, they would not bother to say anything or do anything at all! People do not bother to oppose what they truly believe to be ineffective. They just laugh and go about their business. The very fact they find us worth their time and effort to refute proves they feel at least somewhat threatened by our work.

Verses 4-6

4. How did Nehemiah respond to this ridicule? What did he say?

5. What did the Jews do? What was the result? What can we learn?

### ***Nehemiah's response: Prayer and trust in God***

Nehemiah dealt with the discouragement by going to the ultimate source of strength: He appealed to God in prayer. Likewise, when we are taunted regarding our apparent weaknesses, we should remember that true strength is not ultimately found in any of the sources that people say we lack. True strength does not lie in numbers, wealth, influence, etc. True strength lies in God and His word. So when we face discouragement and ridicule, we too need to turn to God and the strength He can supply. (Cf. Psalms 123:3,4.)

Nehemiah called on God to hear their taunting and be aware of the fact that His people were despised. He called on God to turn the reproach back on those who spoke the reproach. That is, let the people suffer who wanted to cause suffering to God's people. (Cf. Psalms 79:12.) They did the wrong, so let them suffer for it, instead of God's people suffering.

He said God could even send them as captives to a foreign land. This is the punishment that God had put on the Jews for their rebellion against Him. Now they had returned to serving Him and had come back to the land, and now they were being mocked for the weakness that had come upon them. A fitting punishment for those who mocked them would be for them to now be sent into captivity!

Further, he called on God to not cover or overlook the iniquity of the enemies – they had not repented of it, so they should not be allowed to go unpunished but should be punished even as the Jews had when they had refused to repent of their sins. The things the enemies had said were not just a reproach on the people who were building the wall; they were a reproach on God Himself, because it was God's work the people were doing. (Cf. Psalms 69:27,28; 109:14,15; Jer. 18:23.)

Likewise, when people today revile the people of God who are doing His work, they are actually reproaching God. Such conduct angers God and is worthy of punishment.

### ***The people then continued the work.***

Having prayed for strength, Nehemiah and the people just kept working. The result was that the wall was built and completely joined together to half of its height. Clearly God's blessing was behind this work, but it was also possible because the people had a mind to work.

God does not bless those who will not work for Him. So to be successful, first we must trust in God, then we must be willing to work for Him: Trust and obey, faith and works. If we think we cannot succeed in God's work, and if we look at our own weaknesses and problems, then we get discouraged and do not work. But when we trust God and work willingly, He can accomplish through us much more than we even thought possible.

Are we of a mind to work in the church today? Could it be that the church is often unsuccessful in God's work today, not because we are lacking numbers and wealth, etc., but because we do not trust in God enough to work diligently at the work He has given us? Instead of having

a mind to work for God, could it be we have a mind to make money for our own benefit and enjoy pleasure, entertainment, sports, TV, and other activities for ourselves instead of for God?

## **B. Second Method of Opposition: Plots of Violence and Warfare**

Verses 7-9

6. How did the enemies react when they saw the work continuing? What did they plan next?
7. Special Assignment: List other Bible examples in which enemies attempted physical harm against God's people.
8. How did Nehemiah respond to this problem (v9)?

### ***The enemies plot attack and violence.***

Sanballat and Tobiah, along with their companions the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites, heard that the work on the wall was progressing and prospering. The walls were being restored and the gaps were being closed. This made the enemies very angry. Enemies of the truth today are likewise especially angry when they see our work for God is progressing and prospering.

So the enemies determined to move on to more extreme measures. They plotted to attack the workers in the city and create confusion. If they attacked while the wall was still incomplete, they might succeed in causing such confusion, disorganization, and discouragement that the work would stop.

This has often been the pattern of the enemies of truth. First they mock and ridicule God's people. But if that does not stop the work, then they move on to physical violence or threats of violence. Many examples exist in the early history of the gospel. Consider the deaths of John (Matt. 14), Jesus (Matt. 27), Stephen (Acts 7), and James (Acts 12). Consider the imprisonment of Peter (Acts 4,5,12) and Paul (Acts 16; etc.), and others (Acts 8).

While our society frowns on physical violence against religious people, it is sometimes threatened. And imprisonment is not unknown. And who knows what the future holds?

### ***Nehemiah responded by further prayer and setting a watch.***

The response to the mockery and ridicule had been based on prayer to God. When the opposition became more extreme, more prayer was needed. Some lose faith when the opposition is not easily overcome. They think God does not hear them or does not care. But Nehemiah continued to trust God and just encouraged more prayer.

But again they responded with work as well as prayer. They set a watch against the enemies day and night. That is, they assigned people to be on guard to watch for the enemy to attack. Then the Jews could be warned to defend themselves. Note that we are responsible to work to bring about what we pray for. Prayer is not an excuse to leave everything to God while we do nothing. Rather it obligates us to do what we can.

So today when people plan to do violence to God's people, we need to continue to pray. And it is appropriate for us to be watchful for the harm they can do us. Of course, we do not respond with physical violence – neither Jesus nor His disciples ever defended themselves with force against their spiritual enemies (John 18:36). We fight a spiritual battle (Eph. 6:12), so we must be on guard spiritually for the spiritual attacks of Satan and his people (1 Peter 5:8; 2 Cor. 10:3-5)).

Verses 10-12

9. How did the Jews themselves express discouragement (v10)?
10. What did the enemies say to increase the Jews' fears?

### ***The people began to become discouraged.***

At this point the pressures of the task and the threats of the enemies began to take a toll on the people, and they did begin to become discouraged. Some warned Nehemiah that there was



so much rubbish that the people could not work on the wall. The strength of the people was failing. They began to think they could not finish the job.

Likewise the enemies continued their pressures. They plotted sneak attacks in which they would come unexpectedly into the midst of the people and kill some of them. They hoped this would cause the work to cease. Apparently they did not realize the Nehemiah was aware of their plans, or perhaps they thought they could still attack unexpectedly and create enough havoc to defeat the work.

Note how similar this is to modern terrorism: unexpected sneak attacks that kill innocent citizens with the hope of discouraging the people till they give in to the terrorists' demands. Such plots are nothing new. We will see how Nehemiah dealt with them.

The knowledge of this danger began to cause the Jews to become fearful, especially those who lived closest to the enemies. Ten times they came to Nehemiah appealing for protection. They implied that the enemies would attack at whatever place Nehemiah turned from – i.e., when he moved away from an area, that is where the attack would come. He could not be everywhere at once and defend everyone, so they were insecure.

### ***Important works face critical times of discouragement.***

Such points of discouragement are typical in the course of important tasks. When the work first begins, people are enthusiastic. The enthusiasm carries them over the hurdles and hardships. And when the task nears its end, people can see that the end is at hand, so they are encouraged to continue working to see it through. But somewhere in the middle of the task often comes a point of discouragement in which people are not sure they are able to finish.

Often this is a combination, as in this case, of internal and external problems. People within the group begin to grumble and complain or become discouraged. People outside the group are attempting to make the work as difficult as possible. So the enormity of the task combined with opposition of enemies begins to take its toll.

Nehemiah and the people faced such a critical time, and we often do likewise in our work today. If we can get through these times and still keep on working, often we can get the job done. But if we allow the discouragement to overwhelm us, we fail.

Verses 13-15

11. What arrangements did Nehemiah make for the defense of the people (v13)?
12. What did he say to urge the people to courage (v14)?
13. Application: How would these principles apply to us today?
14. What happened when the enemies learned of Nehemiah's preparations?

### ***Nehemiah's plan to keep the work progressing***

Nehemiah was wise enough to realize that the work was at a critical point and that steps could be taken and needed to be taken to keep the work going. First he positioned people with weapons at the openings in the wall and behind the lower parts of the wall. Here he grouped them by families.

This appears to me to be a means of providing protection at the weakest points of the wall, perhaps combined with a measure to make sure all the people were within the safety of the wall. Instead of being exposed in those areas near the enemies (v12), the people and their families would be behind the walls. This is expressly stated to be the case at night in v22.

Then he gave the leaders and the people encouragement. He reminded them that they did not need to be paralyzed by fear; they should not act as cowards but be strong. First, he reminded them that God was on their side. He would fight for them, as He had so many times in the past (Num. 14:9; Deut. 1:29; 2 Sam. 10:12). This did not mean they would not have to fight, but it meant that God's strength would sustain them in that fight.

Then he urged them to be willing to fight for their families and property: their wives, sons, daughters, brothers, and homes.

Note that his plan did not include giving in to the threats of the enemies. When we give up the work and give in to the demands of terrorists and those who threaten us, we have rewarded them with success. Such appeasement will not motivate them to leave us alone. Rather, it encourages them to try again with other demands. If they get their way by threats and violence once, they will just offer more threats and violence to get their way again and again. What is needed instead is a plan to overcome the danger while continuing to do the work.

### ***The enemies' plots are defused.***

The enemies became aware then that Nehemiah and the Jews knew about their plans. They were not going to succeed with surprise attacks, as they had hoped, because the people were protected behind the walls and were on guard. Furthermore, they were prepared to fight and defend their families.

This led the enemies to be the ones who were discouraged. They were apparently unwilling to fight if it required a direct attack on those who were prepared to fight back. Like terrorists, they sought to harm defenseless, unprotected citizens whom they thought would not fight back. So they did not attack at all!

As a result, the people were able to return to working on the wall. It appears that initially the work was discontinued as the people prepared for defense against the enemies. But once it became apparent that the enemies would not attack as long as the people were prepared for defense, they could return to the work.

Note that God was given credit for bringing the plot of the enemies to nothing. This was God's answer to their prayers. (Cf. Job 5:12.)

### ***We need similar plans today.***

As already discussed, we do not fight physical battles in God's service today (see v8). But we need similar strength and courage in our spiritual battles. We should not be afraid but remember that we are doing God's work. So if we trust and pray to Him, He will work and fight for us, just as He has always done for His faithful servants.

Likewise, we need to be concerned enough for our families that we are willing to fight the spiritual battles required by opposition to sin. We must never allow temptation, false doctrine, and especially the forces of evil in the world to take our family members into sin without a fight! We must take out the armor of God and the sword of the spirit and fight the good fight of faith!

Family members must decide for themselves whether or not to faithfully serve God, but let them never leave the faith without a fight on our part to save them from sin! We cannot be certain that no family member will ever be lost to Satan; they are free moral agents. But diligent effort and courageous spiritual warfare will defeat him if our loved ones truly want to serve the Lord.

Verses 16-18

15. How did Nehemiah's servants work afterward (v16)?
16. How did the workers protect themselves?

### ***Nehemiah's provisions for defense as the work continued***

Although the enemies' initial plots had been defused, the very nature of such plots is that they demand God's people to be always on guard. Had the Jews discontinued their vigilance, the enemies could simply proceed with their original plans. So Nehemiah made ongoing provisions for the people to be protected even as the work continued. They were now convinced that they could return to the work, but they also had to provide defense as they worked. Both were now needed.

From that time on, half of Nehemiah's servants worked on the wall, while the other half continued armed and ready for battle. (This appears to me to refer, not to the people in general, but to Nehemiah's own special servants – note v23. The people in general are described in the fol-

lowing verses.) Meanwhile, the leaders continued to give the people support, encouragement, and guidance.

When workers carried burdens, they arranged their loads so that they carried with one hand and kept a weapon in the other hand. As they did construction work on the wall itself, people were also armed, having a sword or weapon with them at all times.

Meanwhile, Nehemiah had a man with him at all times who was prepared to sound a trumpet. We will see his purpose as the description proceeds.

The point of these measures was constant preparation for defense even as the work continued. The danger was not allowed to prevent the work, but the work also did not prevent the defense. Both measures were needed.

Verses 19-21

17. How would the people be warned to come to the defense when the enemy attacked (vv 19,20)?

18. Where did the people spend the nights? Why?

### ***Provisions for attack if it came***

Everyone was armed and prepared for battle. But Nehemiah explained to the leaders and the people that the wall was large, so the workers were widely separated from one another. When an attack came, it would surely occur at some particular point on the wall, not on the whole wall at once. But they could never know where an attack would come. So some means was needed to rally the people to the point of attack, wherever it came.

This is what the man with the trumpet would accomplish (v18). The trumpet would warn the people where the attack was occurring, so the people would know to gather there to fight the defense. (We are not told exactly how the trumpeter would indicate where the attack was occurring. Perhaps the choice of notes sounded would indicate the place or perhaps the trumpeter would go to the spot and blow the trumpet there.)

But in any battle that came, they were to remember that God was with them and would fight for them (cf. v14; Ex. 14:14,25; Deut. 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; Josh. 23:10; 2 Chron. 20:29).

So in this way “we labored in the work.” Half held spears from morning till night, even as the others worked (as on v16, I am not sure whether this applied to the people in general or just to Nehemiah’s personal servants).

Verses 22,23

19. How was the diligence of Nehemiah and his servants described?

20. Case Study: Some people say we should always be positive, so they object if we oppose other people’s religious views. What application would this context have to such thinking?

21. Summarize lessons we can learn from this chapter regarding opposing error.

### ***Further provisions for safety***

The final descriptions of the provisions included that all the people and their servants were to stay in the city behind the wall at night. One advantage of this was that the people could all serve to protect one another. None would be exposed to special danger by being near the enemies without protection, as the people had feared (v12). All would be behind the wall to be protected and to help protect the others. The other advantage was that all were in the city so they could help in the work on the wall during the day.

### ***The diligence of Nehemiah and his servants***

Nehemiah, his servants, his brothers (presumably his literal brothers), and his special guard that accompanied him were always on call to meet a need in the city. They never even took off their clothes except to wash (presumably to wash themselves and/or to wash the clothes). This

meant they were always ready to respond to any emergency. They would not even have to take time to clothe themselves.

The next chapter tells more about the dedication of Nehemiah and his servants to the work of God.

### ***The need for positive and negative work in the kingdom today***

Many lessons can be learned from Nehemiah's efforts to protect the people and deal with their enemies. The most basic one is our need to trust God and pray to Him for care and protection. Another lesson is the need for constant vigilance against enemies.

But a special lesson is that our work for God is both positive and negative. It involves both offense and defense. We must build up God's kingdom (as the Jews built the wall), even as we fight the forces of evil. Our work is neither entirely offensive nor entirely defensive but a combination of both. We must protect the Christians from being taken captive by Satan to sin and destruction, even as we help them grow and help save the lost from sin.

The ultimate goal is positive: we seek to build up the kingdom by helping souls be saved and grow up in Christ. But to achieve this we must also fight against temptation, sin, and false doctrine both within the church and from without. We fight evil, not because we enjoy being negative or combative, but because it is necessary to help people be saved.

And finally note that all people need to be both offensive and defensive. Everyone needs to be prepared to fight against the forces of evil even as he works to grow and to help others to be saved and to grow. This is not the work of just a few. We cannot leave the fighting up to others while we try to be constructive, nor vice-versa. All must be prepared to work in both ways.

## **Notes on Nehemiah 5**

### **V. Internal Problems Hinder the Work – Chap. 5**

#### **Step #7 in useful service to God: Rebuke Sin among God's People.**

Verses 1-5

1. What did some Jews claim other Jews had done? What problems resulted?

#### ***Conflict developed among the Jews***

In the midst of the work of building the wall of the city and facing opposition from those outside God's people, Nehemiah had to deal with problems among God's people. People who were Jews, men and their wives, raised a complaint against their Jewish brethren.

Likewise today in our service to God problems will confront us, not just from those who are not God's people, but also sometimes from among those who are God's people. We must deal with problems from within as well as problems from outside.

#### ***The complaint: Jews were taking unfair advantage of the hardships of other Jews.***

The complaint was that men could not provide enough food for their sons and daughters (v2). Some had even mortgaged their fields, vineyards, and houses to get money to buy food, because there had been a famine or drought (v3). Some had to borrow money to pay the taxes that the king had levied on fields and vineyards (v4).

The end result was that some of them had to sell their own children to be slaves, but then could not redeem them, because other men now controlled their property. Apparently having mortgaged their property, they were not able to pay the interest they were being charged (see subsequent verses). Then when they could not pay, the creditors foreclosed and took the property. This left the people without means to provide income for their families, so they ended up selling them as slaves. Even then they might have some hope of redeeming them (buying them

back) from slavery, if they could have a source of income. But as it was, they were in effect losing everything they had to their creditors.

But they said they had the same flesh as their fellow-Jews and had children like theirs. This meant they were all of the same nation, all related to one another as descendants of Jacob. The point of this, we will see, is that Jews were forbidden by the law to charge interest to other Jews, and they could take slaves only for a limited period of time. So the charge was that the creditors were not following the law of God regarding how to treat fellow-Jews in time of need.

The people faced a circumstance where, even above other times, they should have been united, working together in a common cause. Instead, they were taking unfair advantage of unfortunate circumstances others faced. Instead of caring and assisting one another, they sought their own gain at the loss of others.

Verses 6

2. How did Nehemiah react when he heard (v6)? (Think: Is anger always wrong? Explain.)
3. List and explain Old Testament Scriptures that these Jews violated.

### ***Nehemiah's anger at the conduct of the Jews***

Nehemiah became very angry when he heard these complaints. Note that anger is not necessarily wrong. In fact, the Bible records many examples especially in which righteous leaders of God's people were very angry when they observed sin in the lives of others. See Psalm 7:11; Exodus 11:4-8; 32:19-24; Numbers 16:15; Mark 3:5; 2 Corinthians 7:11; Ephesians 4:26.

Nehemiah was upset that the people were guilty of sin. Sin should always upset us. No faithful servant of God should be neutral about sin. We should especially be upset when God's people mistreat one another, and especially when it happens at a time when it is so important for people to work together to serve God.

### ***The nature of the sin the people had committed***

Many Scriptures forbade what the Jews were doing to one another: See Exodus 21:2-6; 22:25-27; Lev. 25:13-17,35-38,39-46; Deut. chap. 15; 23:19,20; Ezek. 22:12.

The law said that children of Israel could not charge interest of other Israelites who became poor. This did not forbid charging interest of people of other nations, nor did it forbid charging interest for loans for other purposes, such as business expansion or personal pleasure, etc. But when an Israelite was in need, fellow-Israelites were to have pity and help them by lending without interest. Clearly this law was being violated by those who were charging interest to the suffering Jews in Nehemiah's day.

Furthermore, the law provided for a needy Jew to sell himself or family members to be slaves in time of need. This too was actually an act of mercy, because the owner then was responsible to provide for the needs of the slave, who otherwise would have no means to provide for his needs. But Israelites could not permanently enslave other Israelites. After seven years, the owner had to let the slave go, unless the slave wanted to stay. Again, this did not apply to slaves of people from other nations, but only to Israelite slaves.

Furthermore, property that was bought from others had to be returned whenever the year of jubilee occurred, once every fifty years. Knowing this was required, when property was sold its value was calculated on the basis of the number of years the buyer could hold it till he had to return it on the year of jubilee.

Obviously, the Jews here in Nehemiah 5 were violating all these commands of the law.

Verses 7-9

4. List 5 things in vv 7-9 that Nehemiah did to deal with them.
5. Explain why these Jews' conduct was especially bad at this point in the story.
6. List and explain *passages* showing what the New Testament church should do when members sin.

### *How Nehemiah dealt with the problem*

We have seen that he was bothered about the problem. Many people are upset over problems among God's people but do nothing about them. Nehemiah determined to act. What did he do?

We can learn much from his example. What Nehemiah did here is the same basic procedure we should follow when we observe Christians today sin against other Christians.

#### **1. He decided upon a Scriptural plan of action.**

He thought about the matter seriously. He studied the matter out and decided how best to proceed. He did not ignore the matter, as many people do. But neither did he fly off half-cocked and act or speak without thinking the matter through first. He thought the matter out carefully before he acted. We should do the same before we attempt to resolve a problem among God's people.

#### **2. He confronted the people and directly stated the charges against them.**

He personally rebuked the nobles and rulers who were guilty. He stated his charge against them: they were exacting usury (interest) of their brethren – i.e., fellow-Jews.

Note that he did not gossip behind their backs, as many do. He did not just commiserate with innocent victims. He confronted the guilty. This takes courage, but it is the only way to resolve the problem.

Many people today think we should just overlook problems among God's people. We are told that attempting to deal with them might just stir up more trouble or drive people away. But wrong is wrong. People were suffering, and souls were in danger. Furthermore, sin among God's people also drives people away from God, as we will see. Failing to deal with problems just creates more problems. Nehemiah dealt with the problem by confronting those in sin. We must do the same.

#### **3. He called a meeting of the whole assembly to deal with the sins.**

V7 tells us that he confronted those in sin and accused them to their faces, then he called them to account in the presence of the congregational assembly. We are not told of any discussion that occurred with them at that time, though I suppose some must have occurred. In any case, it was appropriate to take this matter before the whole congregation, because the sins of the creditors were widely known. Many people were involved and others knew about it. It was not a private matter to be resolved privately, so Nehemiah called a meeting of the assembly to deal with it.

Likewise today, when some of God's people are known to be guilty of sin, the matter must be resolved before the congregation. If men repent, they must acknowledge it to the congregation. If not, the matter must be taken before the church to be dealt with.

See verses on church discipline for how sin among God's people should be dealt with today: 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15; Matthew 18:15-17; Titus 3:10,11; Romans 16:17,18; 1 Timothy 1:3-11,19,20; 2 Corinthians 2:6-11; 2 John 9-11; Hebrews 12:15; 1 Corinthians 15:33.

#### **4. He presented his evidence against the men in the presence of the assembly.**

He explained how, to the extent they were able, the Jews had just gone to great lengths to redeem their Jewish brethren from slavery in other nations. They had been in captivity in Babylon and elsewhere, but had been allowed to return. With great effort and expense, they had helped one another leave bondage.

Did it make sense to work so hard to help their fellow-Jews escape slavery at the hand of other nations, only to enslave them to other Jews? Jews were enslaving other Jews. It was bad enough if Jews suffered at the hands of other nations. Should they suffer at the hands of one another? Such made no sense, so this showed the error of the creditors.

Those who were guilty had no answer for Nehemiah's arguments. Note the value of reasoning with people in error, confronting them directly, even in the presence of the whole assembly of God's people.

### **5. Nehemiah explained the bad influence of such conduct.**

He reasoned further that such conduct was bad, because it would bring upon them and upon God reproach from their enemies. They all knew they had enemies. They were still in the midst of dealing with those enemies at the end of chap. 4.

When God's people themselves are guilty of sin and mistreating one another, this gives people in sin justifiable grounds to ridicule God and His people. We often hear people today ridicule the sin and hypocrisy among God's people. "Why should I want to be one of them? I'm already as good as they are!"

Many passages warn of the danger that improper conduct among God's people will drive people away from God. See 1 Timothy 4:12; Matthew 5:13-16; 18:6,7; Titus 2:7,8; 1 Peter 2:11,12; 2 Corinthians 6:3; 8:20,21; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 10:23-33; 2 Samuel 12:14; Romans 2:24.

Note that this is an argument regarding the importance of proper influence. Sometimes people claim that we need not be concerned for what effect we have on the enemies of truth, because they are lost and don't care about God anyway. But God cares! He does not want these people to have justifiable grounds to reproach Him or His people. And sinful conduct among God's people makes it so much harder for those in sin to be converted to the truth.

Verses 10,11

7. What example did Nehemiah set, and what did he tell the erring Jews to do?

8. List and explain *passages* showing the need for repentance and restitution.

### **6. Nehemiah set a good example.**

Nehemiah himself, along with his brothers and his servants, were lending money and grain to the people in need. Obviously they did so without charging interest. So he called on the other creditors to likewise quit charging interest.

Surely Nehemiah did not mean this to be boastful or bragging. The point was that he himself was already showing them the example of what they should do. It was both possible and proper to lend money to those in need without charging interest. This would eliminate the problem. So he directly called on the people to imitate his example and cease charging interest.

Note how important it is, when we face sin and seek to stand for truth, that we ourselves have a clear conscience and a good example. Nehemiah could never have convinced others to cease mistreating others had he himself been guilty. The same applies to us today.

### **7. He called for repentance and restitution.**

Having charged them to discontinue charging interest and no longer do so in the future (v10), Nehemiah then demanded that they make restoration of the things they had wrongfully taken: lands, vineyards, olive groves, houses, and the portion of the money and crops that they had charged the people.

Note that there was to be no procrastination. He said to do it "even this day." Correction of sin is urgent.

Many Scriptures teach that, when we have committed sin, we must acknowledge the sin, be sorry for it, and determine to cease committing the sin to be forgiven and please God. That is repentance. See Luke 13:3,5; 24:47; Acts 17:30; Matthew 21:28-32; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 20:21; 2 Peter 3:9; 2 Corinthians 7:10; Acts 8:22; Matthew 6:12; 21:28-32; 1 John 1:8-10; Proverbs 28:13.

But it is not enough just to discontinue the sin. To the extent possible we must also correct or overcome the harmful effects caused upon others by the sins we have committed. This is also part of doing the “fruits of repentance.” In this case that required returning the property that had been wrongfully taken. See Ezekiel 33:14,15; Leviticus 6:1-5; Ezra 10:3,11,17,19,44; Matthew 21:28-31; Luke 19:8; Philemon 10-14,18,19.

Verses 12,13

9. What did the people in sin agree to do, and how did Nehemiah respond?

### **8. He required a definite, stated commitment of exactly what changes would be made.**

The sinners stated that they would restore the property and would no longer require of the people that which they had no lawful right to require. In short, they promised to do what Nehemiah had charged them to do. The matter was effectively resolved among God’s people, because the sinners agreed to make the necessary corrections. This is the only acceptable solution likewise today, when there is sin among God’s people.

Nehemiah then went further and called upon the priests, the spiritual leaders, to put the sinners under oath to make a sacred promise to make the correction they had promised to make. Note that it was not enough just to obtain a general promise to “do better,” or a general apology of “I’m sorry.” Nehemiah demanded a specific understanding of exactly what correction was required and a definite, stated commitment on the part of the people of exactly what they were going to do to correct the matter.

Such measures are also needed today when people have sinned, especially when Christians have sinned against one another. We should not be satisfied with just a general confession, “I’m sorry if I have wronged anyone.” When the wrong is known, the sinner must make specific commitment of exactly what they will do in the future to correct the error. Such an approach helps people know exactly what is agreed upon and exactly what to expect of one another. It gives a definite resolution the problem. And it motivates the sinner to make the change that is needed. If he fails to change, everyone will know because everyone knows what he agreed to do.

### **9. He emphasized the seriousness of the matter and warned of the consequences of further sin.**

To show the seriousness of the need for people to make the promised changes, he shook out the folds of his garment. This symbolized that God would likewise shake out the men if they did not keep their promise to change and make restitution. He would reject them and empty them from their own houses and property.

All this solution, including the commitment and the warning of consequences of failure, was witnessed by the people. As a result of the commitment that had been made, those in sin made the needed correction. In short, the solution worked and resolved the matter.

## **Step 8 in useful service to God: Set a Good Example and Be Willing to Sacrifice.**

Verses 14-17

10. What had Nehemiah done to help ease the people’s burden?

11. Application: Explain why a good example is important for God’s people.

### ***Nehemiah did not accept the provisions that had been allotted to the governor.***

Nehemiah did not just require others to care for the needy and seek their wellbeing. He had already stated that he did not charge interest when he loaned to people in need. But these next few verses show how he went even beyond that in sacrificing to achieve the cause for which the nation labored.



First, he said that, for 12 years (from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of the reign of Artaxerxes) he did not take the provisions that the governor had a right to receive (cf. v18). Here we are plainly told that Nehemiah was the governor at that time.

Former governors had taxed the people requiring that they provide the governor with bread and wine and forty shekels of silver. Even the servants of the former governors had made demands of the people. Nehemiah, however, demanded none of this, because of his fear of God.

There is no evidence that it would have been wrong for Nehemiah to accept such provisions to charge for his services. The laborer is worthy of his hire. But he saw the depressed conditions among God's people (see v18), so he did not charge them, apparently having an adequate income from other sources. He practiced what he had preached to the creditors among the Jews, and he even went far beyond what he had required of them.

### ***Nehemiah himself joined in the work.***

He did not consider himself or his servants to be above joining personally in the work on the wall. Rather he and all his servants gathered and participated in the work.

Some leaders think they are too good to personally dirty their hands with the actual work. They think they should sit and supervise while others sweat and labor. True leaders, however, do not just command others; they lead by example.

Likewise, he did not seek personal gain by accumulating wealth for himself. He did not buy land. No doubt this includes especially not taking the land of those in poverty. But apparently in general he did seek to accumulate personal wealth. Rather, he sacrificed so the work could go on and the people not suffer.

We too need to sacrifice for the good of God's work and concentrate on getting the work done in the best way, not trying to accumulate personal gain.

### ***He even provided for the needs of many others at his own expense.***

Besides providing for himself and his servants, without taking provisions from the people, Nehemiah used his own provisions to provide for 150 people who were Jews and rulers. They all sat at his table. He fed them, and perhaps even housed them. And this did not count people whom, as governor, he entertained from surrounding nations.

We are not told what sources of income he used to do this. He had evidently been prominent in Persia, so perhaps he had accumulated some wealth. Or perhaps he received income from the king's treasury, instead of from taxing the people. In any case, the point is that he could have used his position to increase his own wealth and prosperity, but instead he used what he had to forward the work.

All this shows Nehemiah's generosity and concern to see God's work prosper. He was willing to make personal sacrifices, labor hard, and provide for others at his own expense, in order to accomplish the work.

Verses 18,19

12. Describe the daily allowance Nehemiah needed for himself and his people.

### ***Nehemiah's daily provisions summarized***

Providing for all these people required Nehemiah to have prepared one ox and six sheep each day, besides fowl. And every ten days he received an abundance of all kinds of wine (remember that wine is not necessarily alcoholic in the Bible – see notes on 2:1). But in all this he did not require that the people provide for him as governor, because he saw how the people were heavily burdened as it was (see on v14).

Obviously, this provision required an income of some kind, but we are not told what it was. The important point is that he did not take from the people, but gave for the good of the work.

He finishes this description of his efforts on behalf of the work by calling on God to remember all he had done for the good of God's people. He did not expect a reward from the people, but he hoped for reward from God. We should do the same.

What sacrifices have we made to serve God? What have we given up that we might really like to have or do? Many will not even give up personal pleasures, such as sports, entertainment, or recreation, in order to serve God. Some, rather than sacrificing these at times to serve God, actually want the church to provide more of such things for them!

People think, "I want it. I enjoy it. Why should I give it up?" So we persist in pleasing self at the cost of practicing immorality or causing a brother to stumble or just failing to sacrifice as we should to accomplish the work God wants done. We need to learn from Nehemiah.

## Notes on Nehemiah 6

### VI. Opposition Continues Yet the Wall Is Completed – Chap. 6

#### C. Third Method of Opposition: Discussion to Achieve Compromise or to Hinder the Work

Chapter 4 had described the first two major efforts of the Jews' opponents to defeat the efforts to build the walls. They had attempted ridicule and plotted violence, but God had blessed Nehemiah and the people to continue the work despite the opposition. Chapter 5 had described internal strife among the Jews that hindered the work, but that had been overcome by urging people to follow God's law.

This chapter describes continued efforts of the enemies to hinder the work. The first of these efforts involved an attempt to get Nehemiah to meet with the enemies.

Verses 1,2

1. What did the enemies propose next? What was their real intent?

#### *The proposal of the enemies*

These verses tell us that the work on the wall was progressing well, to the point that the wall no longer had any breaks in it. All the wall was joined together; however, the doors had not yet been hung at the gates. The people were accomplishing the work despite the problems and hindrances.

This success was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. These men had opposed Nehemiah's work for God since the beginning. Note that v1 expressly calls them enemies. They had ridiculed the work, accused the Jews of violating the king's commands, and threatened to stop the work by violence (2:10,19; 4:1-9; cf. 6:5-14). They had been shown their error but continued opposing the work (2:20).

Here they continued their opposition, but using a different tactic. They demanded that Nehemiah meet with them in one of the villages on the plain of Ono to discuss. But their intent was to harm him (v2). They did not really want to repent, admit their error, or even discuss to consider the possibility that they might be wrong. Presumably they sought to take Nehemiah captive or even kill him, so the work would be forced to end.

Verses 3,4

2. How did Nehemiah respond? What reasons did he give? (Think: Were these men deserving of further discussion with Nehemiah? How do you know?)
3. How can Nehemiah's conduct be harmonized with passages that say we should teach and save the lost? Under what circumstances may we refuse to discuss certain topics with certain people? Give **b/c/v**.

#### *Nehemiah refuses to meet*

Nehemiah sent messengers saying that he was doing an important work and would not leave it to talk with them.

Note that Nehemiah refused because:

1) These men had consistently shown they were opposed to the work which God wanted done.

2) They had been rebuked, but continued in error.

3) They had previously tried to harm Nehemiah, and they called for this discussion for the purpose of harming him. We are not told how Nehemiah knew this, but their past conduct proved it. Perhaps he had other sources of information besides.

4) To meet with them would accomplish no good but would hinder Nehemiah from doing the work God wanted done.

These men sent similar messages to Nehemiah four separate times, but Nehemiah consistently refused to meet. He always answered them in the same way. Note that people who oppose God's work are often persistent. They continue to try to prevent the work. Sometimes they think they can badger God's people into giving in. But Nehemiah was also persistent. He refused to give in.

### *Lessons for us to learn*

Many Scriptures teach that we should be willing to meet with people in error to try to help them learn the truth and change their lives. See Jude 3,4; 1 Peter 3:15; Mark 12:28; Acts 17:2,3,17; 2 Timothy 4:2-4; Luke 17:3; etc.

However, from passages like this one in Nehemiah we also learn that our obligation in such matters is limited. There are times when it is unprofitable, dangerous, or even wrong to meet with some people under some circumstances. See also Nehemiah 6:1-9; Matthew 7:6; 21:23-32; 26:59-63; 27:12-14; John 19:9; Luke 23:7-10; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:14-18; Titus 3:9-11.

Based on the above Scriptures, we can learn there are two cases in which we should refuse to discuss with people or answer their questions:

#### **1) Some questions should not be allowed to become a cause for strife regardless of who asks them.**

Some subjects have no practical value or profit in helping anyone be saved eternally, but will only lead to strife, argument, conflict, and division.

Examples may include:

\* Arguments over technicalities of genealogies. A person's ancestry has nothing to do with salvation under the gospel.

\* Arguments about technicalities of Old Testament law. That law is no longer in effect. Studying it can benefit our understanding of the nature of God and His will for today. But unless a discussion has some value for our lives today, we should avoid becoming embroiled in disputes.

\* Arguments about technicalities of the nature of angels and other spirit beings: How many angels can sit on the head of a pin?

\* Speculations about hypothetical issues that have no practical value in our lives and in no way affect our eternal destiny. Can God create a mountain so huge He cannot move it? Could God create people on another solar system, and if so must they obey the same commands we do to be saved?

Many other examples could be cited, many of them not as obvious as these. Judgment is involved in individual cases, and we may differ regarding how far to go in a discussion before we realize it is unworthy of discussion. Nevertheless, the principles are valid and should be remembered. Such topics should not be discussed to the point of strife no matter how sincere the people may be who want to discuss them. Rather, we should point out that the topics have no value to saving anyone's soul but cause strife and division. Then we should turn the conversation to topics that are essential to salvation.

## **2) Some people have proved themselves to be unworthy of further teaching even on valuable topics.**

Even when topics do have practical value in serving God, we should refuse to discuss with some people. When they have had abundant opportunity to know the truth but reject it, teach false doctrine, and especially when they use whatever we say as an opportunity to attack and slander us, drop the discussion and move on.

Such people may try to intimidate and pressure us into answering their questions or discussing with them. They may accuse us of having something to hide or not being able to answer. But nothing good will come of such discussions except strife, anger, division, and pain.

### **Often, but not always, these two cases occur together.**

People who reject the truth will often look for opportunities to ensnare or trap us. They will go to lengths to make up hypothetical speculative cases to argue about. We should refuse such discussions for both the reasons we have studied.

Some people and some questions do not deserve to be answered. The only thing that will come from it is prolonging of strife and division, and like swine people will use the opportunity to turn and rend you.

## **D. Fourth Method of Opposition: Make Accusations that Impugn Motives and Attitudes.**

Verses 5-7

4. What accusation did Sanballat make the fifth time he wrote? What proof did he offer? (Think: Did Sanballat really care about the king's well-being? What was his real goal?)

### ***Sanballat writes another letter.***

When the four attempts to compel Nehemiah to meet failed, Sanballat did not give up. Like other enemies of the truth, he moved on to another tactic. He wrote still another letter to Nehemiah. This time, however, it was an open letter. That is, it was not confidential or personal for Nehemiah. Rather, it was written with the intent of circulating it to make other people aware of accusations against Nehemiah.

The letter claimed that the news was being spread, even among people of other nations, that Nehemiah and the Jews were planning to rebel against the government. No proof was offered; in fact the letter admits these were rumors. But Geshem was cited as the source of this accusation. Geshem, of course, was one of Sanballat's companions in opposing the work (cf. 2:19). He could hardly be classed as an unbiased witness. And no evidence is given as the basis for his accusations.

They claimed further that Nehemiah wanted to become king, and the real purpose of the wall was to begin a military buildup so he could succeed in a revolt. They further claimed that Nehemiah had appointed prophets for the express purpose of teaching the people that Nehemiah would be king in Judah.

The letter threatened that all this would be reported to the king of Persia, unless Nehemiah agreed to meet with them about this. This seems to be a threat that if he did not agree to meet, then they would pass on this report to the king. Perhaps they were also pretending that they could help avoid consequence for Nehemiah if he would consult with them, but either way the effect is that of a threat.

Note that, when enemies fail in their requests to meet with God's people (with the intent of using the results to hurt them), the next step is to threaten and accuse as a means of pressuring for a meeting. This includes making false accusations to discredit the reputation of the workers, so they will feel the need to meet to protect their reputation. And if they don't meet, then the accusations against them will be circulated and allowed to stand. However, all this was done on the

basis of accusations that were mere rumors without a shred of evidence offered to support them. Anyone can make accusations. Geshem did so, but there was no proof.

Verses 8,9

5. How did Nehemiah deal with this accusation?

6. Application: What should God's people do when people make false accusations against us today?

Note how Nehemiah dealt with the false accusation:

***Nehemiah denied the accusation and said the enemies had made it up without proof.***

Nehemiah dealt with the false accusation simply by issuing a statement that the accusations were false. The things he was accused of were not being done. Then he said where the ideas came from: the enemies had invented them in their own hearts.

In short he pointed out that there was no proof. Anybody can make accusations. Faithful servants of God have throughout history been accused of all kinds of things that they had never done. But accusations do not constitute proof.

Accusations are likewise made against God's true servants today. We are accused of being motivated by a desire for money, power, or influence. We are said to be jealous or self-righteous, and want to exalt ourselves. We are said to be negative, critical people, condemning and judging others in violation of Scripture, "antis," etc. Or we are said to be motivated by "hate" – we just have something personal against people or want to get rid of them.

Nehemiah simply denied the charges and affirmed the people had made them up without proof. Then since no proof had been offered, he continued with the work. Note that he did not go to meet with the enemies, nor did he stop the work. He did not allow unproved accusations to intimidate him into meeting with the false accusers or into hindering the work God had given him.

***He kept his focus on the real root cause of the conflict.***

He realized that the real motive behind all these accusations and the efforts to get meetings was to make him afraid so he would stop the work. The enemies were using a psychological ploy. The goal was to get the Jews to think that, if they kept working, these charges would be reported to the king and the people might get in trouble even if the charges could not be proved. But if they would stop the work, then the enemies would stop the accusations, would not report them to the king, etc. So the temptation is to stop simply because of the intimidation and fear of reprisals, not because there was any truth to the charges.

Note that Nehemiah not only did not take the bait to meet with the enemies, but he kept his focus on the real issues involved. The enemies could not prove their accusations against him. But even more important, they did not really care about those accusations. The real concern on their part was not whether or not Nehemiah would rebel against the king. Their real concern was that the wall was being built, and they wanted to stop it.

This shows another important principle of dealing with false accusation: Keep the focus on the real root cause of the conflict. Do not be distracted into discussions of secondary issues. If false accusations are made, just deny them. But keep your focus on the real root issue. Doing this helps us overcome the temptation to be intimidated and back off from the really important issue.

***He prayed to God for strength.***

Not only did he keep working, but he prayed to God to give him strength to endure the hardship and to keep on with the work. This is exactly what we need to do when we face such false accusations.

Remember that God is the one we ultimately seek to please. If we cease doing His will in order to have peace with men, then we have displeased the One whom we really ought to please.

He is the one who gave us orders, and He is the one who can give us strength to prevail. Trust Him and keep His will foremost.

### **E. Fifth Method of Opposition: Tempt Leaders to Sin or Fear so as to Discredit Them.**

Verses 10,11

7. Who then tried to influence Nehemiah? What did he say?
8. How did Nehemiah respond?

#### ***Nehemiah is tempted to hide in the temple.***

The next effort to hinder and discredit Nehemiah's work came from a man named Shemaiah. This man was a secret informer. The ASV says he was "shut up." The two translations are hard to reconcile. Nehemiah went to his house. Perhaps Shemaiah had to some extent barricaded himself as a way of showing fear and thereby motivating Nehemiah to do likewise. In any case, "secret informer" seems to express the context best in that he attempted to give Nehemiah secret advice.

He said the two of them should meet and hide in the temple. They should close the doors and barricade themselves in (perhaps like Shemaiah was in his home) for safety from enemies. He secretly informed Nehemiah that the enemies had plotted to kill him. They would come at night to kill him, so the thing to do was to hide for protection in the temple.

#### ***Nehemiah refused to show fear or to hide in the temple.***

Nehemiah argued that one in his position should not show such fear. He should not flee and he should not go into the temple to save his own life. So he refused to go in.

V13 will show that such an act would be a perversion of the purpose of the temple and a violation of its sanctity. Only priests should enter there. Perhaps there were porches where other people could go, but remember that Jesus later cast people out of the temple for using it for purposes other than worship and prayer. To use it for personal protection would be disrespectful to its purpose.

Also showing cowardice to flee and hide would be a hindrance to the work. Nehemiah could not effectively work from a place of hiding. And if the people saw him being so cowardly, they too might become fearful and hide to protect themselves, instead of working. In short, this was another attempt to hinder the work and get Nehemiah to stop working.

We need to remember that sin is wrong in and of itself, even when done for personal protection from persecution. And when we try to do right but allow people to intimidate us to sin or to be disrespectful or cowardly, then we allow them to discredit our work and defeat our efforts for good.

Note that fleeing in and of itself is not sinful. New Testament apostles, preachers, and Christians often fled for safety. But they did not stop their work of preaching the gospel. To allow fear to lead us to stop working for God is the problem.

Verses 12-14

9. Why had this man given this warning? What did Nehemiah's enemies hope to accomplish?

#### ***Nehemiah realized the source of the temptation.***

Nehemiah then realized that the man had not been giving him advice from God or in harmony with God's will. Rather, he pronounced this as a prophecy, but he had been hired by Tobiah and Sanballat, the enemies of God's work.

This implies that Shemaiah had presented this as something God would have Nehemiah do, or perhaps even something that God had revealed by prophecy (cf. v14). This shows the danger

of following messages that claim to be from God, if those messages actually contradict God's will.

It also shows that many false teachers are teaching for hire. They have been paid by people to teach as they do.

***Had Nehemiah taken the advice, he would have sinned and subjected himself and his work to reproach.***

Nehemiah realized that Shemaiah had been hired to tempt Nehemiah to be afraid, hide in the temple, and sin. Then the enemies would have cause to send out an evil report, that they might reproach him. That is, they could discredit him for his sin and cowardice.

As discussed on vv 10,11, had Nehemiah listened to this advice, he would have shown cowardice, neglected the work, and misused the purpose of the temple. This would have been sin (though it does not directly say which part of this was sin or whether it was all sin).

When people cannot intimidate God's people to stop working for God, they often try to discredit us so other people will not listen to us or follow the teaching. They may try to do this by false accusation (as in the previous verses). If that does not work, then they try to get us to actually sin, so they can have grounds to accuse and discredit us. Compare the story of Balaam and Balak (see Revelation 2:14).

This shows the need for courage and a pure life on the part of God's people, especially the leaders. We need to avoid sin, even in the face of false teaching, temptation, threats, and intimidation. We can be sure that people in sin will use everything they can think of against us, so we must give them no ammunition. To fail to live pure lives will discredit our work and hinder God's purpose.

***Again Nehemiah prayed to God to deal with his enemies.***

Nehemiah was clearly a man of prayer, and he saw the value of prayer in times of temptation and opposition. He repeatedly turned to God in prayer for strength to deal with the enemies.

He asked God to remember the sinful acts of Tobiah and Sanballat. Also he said a prophetess named Noadiah and other prophets were involved in the attempt to make him afraid. This clearly indicates that more than just one man was involved in the temptation of Nehemiah, and that the attempt did involve the use of prophecy to try to frighten him.

And note too that it is not wrong to call upon God to bring justice and punishment on evildoers. We may not take personal vengeance, but we should leave vengeance to God. It is appropriate for us to remind God that such people do deserve His punishment.

Verses 15,16

10. What was the end result of the people's work (v15)?

***The completion of the wall***

Despite the best efforts of the enemies, the work continued till the wall was finished. It was completed on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the month Elul. It took a total of 52 days. To complete the wall at all was amazing. To complete it under conditions of such opposition is doubly amazing. To do it in 52 days is almost incredible. Yet that is what happened.

God has not promised that serving Him will be easy. On the contrary, He has promised there will be opposition and persecution. But He has also promised that we can be successful if we remain faithful despite the opposition and persecution.

***The enemies were discouraged by this result.***

When the enemies and surrounding nations heard that the wall was completed, they were discouraged. Note that this shows the real motivation for the opposition. Sanballat and his cronies were leaders of opposition by the nations in general. They did not act alone; many people did not want the wall built, because they belonged to enemy nations. They did not want the Jews to be established or become strong. This was the real issue.

When the Jews succeeded, this caused great discouragement to the enemies. They were disheartened. And they realized that the work had been the result of God's own blessing.

## **F. Sixth Method of Opposition: Influence God's People to Justify Those who Are in Sin.**

Verses 17-19

11. What relationships did some Jews have with Tobiah? What problems resulted? What can we learn?
12. Summarize lessons we can learn from this chapter about how to deal with those who oppose God's work?

### ***Nobles among the Jews were in communication with the enemies.***

Tobiah was one of those in league with Sanballat (2:10; 4:3; 6:19; etc.). But Nehemiah reveals that he was communicating regularly with many influential people among the Jews. Many letters were being passed back and forth. The Jews should have been helping in the work on the wall and encouraging those who were working. But meanwhile they were communicating with the enemy, and we will see that they became an influence against the work.

It turns out that Tobiah was married to a daughter of an influential Jew named Shechaniah, whose genealogy is given in the verse (cf. 13:4). And also Tobiah's son Jehohanan was married to the daughter of another influential Jew named Meshullam. This Meshullam is listed in Nehemiah 3:4 as being one of those who ought to be working on the wall (cf. 8:4). Yet they were allied by marriage to one of the enemies and were as a result "pledged" to him. This surely means they were in league with him. They were trying to help his cause, as shown in v19.

This shows the danger of intermarriage and the power of having a close relationship with those who are in sin. Interestingly, Ezra 10:15 lists a Meshullam as being among those who opposed Ezra's efforts to bring repentance and correction among the Jews who had intermarried with people of the land. This might be another man with the same name, but the similarity of circumstances might be more than mere coincidence. If both passages refer to the same individual, this helps explain all the more the problem caused by intermarriage to people in sin.

### ***Agents among God's people fraternizing and working for the enemy***

Specifically, these people became Tobiah's agents working from within God's people. They were numbered among God's people, but they spoke well of Tobiah to Nehemiah, trying to convince him that Tobiah was doing good.

Meanwhile, they also served as a source of information to Tobiah to tell him what Nehemiah was doing. This amounted to being spies or a source of intelligence within the Jews' camp to inform the enemy what was going on.

Meanwhile, Tobiah himself wrote letters to Nehemiah to try to frighten him. What these letters said we are not specifically told. Perhaps they go along with the threats recorded earlier in this chapter and in chap. 4. Presumably they made use of the information Tobiah had obtained from among the Jews.

In any case, while we are not told exactly what Nehemiah tried to do about these Jews in league with Tobiah, still it was clearly a problem. It shows the danger of those who try to be among God's people but are compromisers.

Today, in virtually every case in which God's people have conflict with those in error, there will be some who seek to hold a middle-ground position. They want to speak well of people on both sides. But especially they try to convince those who are taking a firm stand against sin that the people in sin are really not so bad. They speak well of them, talk about their sincerity and good works, and try to say we should not oppose them. They try to bring about compromise and discourage a firm stand against sin.



In many cases such people are a problem as big or bigger than the enemy. We must teach them the truth and give them time to see the truth. But if they continue to sympathize with the enemy, then they become like the enemy and must be dealt with accordingly. See Scriptures on fellowship with sin: 2 John 9-11; Ephesians 5:11; Proverbs 17:15; 2 Corinthians 6:17-7:1; 1 Timothy 5:22; Psalms 1:1,2; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Romans 1:32; Acts 7:58; 8:1; 22:20.

## Notes on Nehemiah 7

Verses 1,2

1. What work had been accomplished at this point (v1)?
2. What two specific men were named in v2, and what positions were they given?
3. What characteristics qualified them for this work? Why would these qualities be important?

### *Responsibilities assigned and organized*

The wall was now complete, doors set in place, etc. Various responsibilities were assigned. Porters or gatekeepers might be compared to modern security guards — perhaps to keep unauthorized people from going where they should not (see v3 below).

Singers were part of the worship appointed by David (I Chronicles 25:1; 2 Chronicles 35:15). Levites were responsible to care for the temple and the ceremonies there, etc.

As governor of Judah (5:14; 8:9), Nehemiah had the authority to delegate responsibilities to men of his choosing. He chose his brother Hanani (cf. 1:2) to be in charge of the city of Jerusalem, and also another man named Hananiah to be in charge of the citadel (castle — perhaps this was a responsibility for military leadership, or of the governor's headquarters).

He chose Hanani because he possessed faithfulness and fear (respect) for God more so than others did. Such qualities need to also be considered seriously in people we chose for jobs.

Verses 3,4

4. Describe the provisions made to guard the gates.
5. Why were these precautions needed?

### *Gates closed for protection*

Those responsible for the city were charged to keep the doors closed all night and into the day until the sun was hot. Guards were appointed even though the wall was now complete. They were to stand guard and make sure the doors were shut and barred. Some stood at watch stations and others guarded near their own houses. (The fact they stood guard near where they and their family lived would motivate them to be diligent in their duties.)

These precautions were needed because it was such a large city, but only relatively few people lived there. Presumably they were still concerned about the possibility of attack from their opponents (chapter 4).

Verses 5,6

6. What did Nehemiah decide to do, and what did he find when he did (v5)?

### *Genealogy found for the first group who returned from captivity*

God then informed Nehemiah to gather the leaders and the people to make a current genealogy. In doing this, Nehemiah discovered a genealogy from the first group that returned, and it is recorded here. Compare it to the one given in Ezra 2.

Genealogies were important to Israel in determining property rights to the land, and also to determine who could participate in various offices, especially the priests and Levites, who had to be of certain lineage. Most important was the fact that God had promised that the Christ would be a descendant of Abraham, David, etc. The nation of Israel continued and its lineage was kept, so this promise could yet be fulfilled.

What follows is a genealogy of people who returned from captivity after Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried them away. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his own city.

Verses 7-69

7. What is recorded in the 7:7-69? Where else was this information given?

These verses list the genealogy of people who had come from Babylon. Note in v61-65 certain men who could NOT prove by genealogy that they were Israelites, so they were not permitted to serve as priests, nor to eat of the holy things of priests. See notes on Ezra 2:61-63 for further discussion. We will not repeat the information here.

Verses 70-73

8. Describe the financial contributions various people made to the work (vv 70-72).

9. How was the condition of the people summarized in v73? What time of year was this?

These verses list various financial contributions made. Some were made by heads of households, others by the governor himself, and others by the rest of the people.

The result was that the people of Israel dwelt in their cities: the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, and Nethinim. See on Ezra 8:20 regarding the Nethinim.

This was the condition of the people in the land when the seventh month of the year began. This was a very special month in the Israelite calendar, because it included various feast days. The next chapter will record some events of their activities on this special month after the wall had been completed.

## Part 2: Spiritual Restoration of the People - Chap. 8-13

### I. Instruction in the Law and Keeping the Feast of Tabernacles – Chap. 8

#### Notes on Nehemiah 8

#### Step #9 in useful service to God: Restore God's service by teaching people His word.

Verses 1-3

1. Where did the people meet? What did Ezra bring?

2. What did Ezra do? What did the people do? (Think: What should we do today when God's law is read and studied?)

#### *The people gather for the reading of the law*

Now that the wall was completed, the people turned to restoring their spiritual service in the city. The law had commanded that the law be read to the people from time to time (Deut. 3:11,12; Joshua 8:34,35; 2 Kings 23:2).

They assembled in a convenient place described as the open square in front of the Water Gate. The reading was led by Ezra the scribe, the same Ezra described in the book of Ezra (see on Ezra 7:6). Ezra had led the second group that returned from captivity, and Nehemiah led the third group. Evidently these were not far apart.

Ezra brought the book of the law and read from it from morning till noon. The message is called the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Moses. Note the clear claim that Moses' writings were inspired by God. See also the notes on v8, where the law is called the Law of God.

Those who were assembled were men, women, and all who could hear and understand what was taught. The people listened attentively to what was read. This occurred on the first day of the 7th month, which was a holy day (v9), the feast of trumpets (see on v14ff).

### **Note the value of reading God's written instructions.**

We today also need to read God's law. In those days before the printing press, copies were hard to come by, so the law was read publicly. New Testament examples record it being read regularly in the synagogues. We should also read it, and we have the advantage that we can easily possess our own copies. This is the value of having the word in writing, but we must realize the value of reading and studying it.

The people paid attention. We should do the same. Attention is hindered by day-dreaming, whispering, joking, playing with babies, etc. Note that, even though the session was lengthy (morning till midday), people still were attentive. They did not complain that they could not absorb any more after a certain length of time, as some complain today. If they could listen and benefit for that long, why can't we?

Verses 4-6

3. How long did this continue? What did the people say and do after hearing the law (v6)?

### **The pattern of the reading**

An elevated platform had been built so the people could see (and presumably hear) Ezra. With him were various other men named here who helped the people understand (see also vv 7,8).

When Ezra praised God, the people said "Amen!" This is an expression of agreement meaning "so be it." It affirms that the hearer agrees that the message spoken is true. It is appropriate for the audience to express "Amen" to the words spoken, provided it is a genuine expression of agreement. It should not be allowed to be done to the point of distracting from the message or simply to drum up excitement. See Nehemiah 5:13; 1 Corinthians 14:16.

We are told that the people stood when he opened the book. When Ezra praised God, the people lifted their hands and bowed their faces toward the ground. This is acceptable posture for worship, but it is surely not the only permissible posture. Many other postures are described in Scripture. What matters is that the acts done in worship be authorized by God and sincerely meant from the heart. Specific posture is not required, though some positions at some time may help us concentrate or express our meaning.

Verses 7,8

4. Besides reading the law, what did the teachers do (vv 7,8)?
5. Based on vv 1-8, list at least four important lessons we can learn about teaching and studying God's word.
6. Compare v1 to v8. What can we learn regarding those who say the "Law of Moses" is a different law from the "Law of God"? Explain.

### **The law read and explained**

Other men are named as assisting in the teaching. The people stood in their place, and these men helped them understand the law as it was read. They did this by explaining the meaning to the people.

This is the plain simple essence of gospel teaching and preaching. Proper teaching requires appeal to the book as the source or basis of our teaching and our only authority. We should not use human ideas as our foundation. Then we help people understand what it says by explaining the meaning. Note that helping people understand the meaning of Scripture is authorized by God. What is not authorized is changing the meaning or adding our own human ideas that differ from it.

Note that the people did understand the meaning – note especially v12. Understanding the written word is not impossible nor is it reserved for specially trained leaders. The common person can understand it but must work hard at studying and learning.

Note also that, comparing v1 to v8 shows that the “law of Moses” and the “law of God” are the same thing. There is no difference as some claim. The terms are interchangeable, because God gave the law, but He gave it through Moses — v1. Some claim that the Law of Moses is the ceremonial law and was removed when Jesus died, but they claim the Law of God is the Moral Law or Ten Commands, which remains in effect today. Passages like this show the error of such distinctions. See also notes on Ezra 7:6.

Verses 9-12

7. What effect did the message have on the people? (Think: Why might they have done this?)
8. What day and month was this (v2)? Note Lev. 23:24 and tell why this day was special.
9. List other **passages** about this day and explain what was to be done on that day.
10. What did the leaders tell the people to do instead of grieving?

### **The people’s reaction to the law**

When the people heard the law, they wept. There are many reasons for weeping when one hears God’s law. This was especially the case of these people, who had not been able to worship as they would have liked to because the city of worship had been so destroyed. We weep when we have godly sorrow for our sin (as in chapter 7; cf. 2 Corinthians 7:10), or when we appreciate how good God has been and how unworthy we are, etc.

However, Nehemiah, Ezra, and the other leaders who were teaching the people told them not to weep. It was not a day for weeping, but was a time for joy. It was a holy day, the Feast of Trumpets –cf. v2 to Leviticus 23:24. This was expressly commanded to be a time for eating and drinking, and giving food to those who were had none - Deut. 16:14; cf. Deut. 26:11-13; Esther 9:19,22. The people did as told.

Note that the passage expressly says that the people understood the message (cf. v8). We too can understand if we study honestly and diligently. Those who claim that the Bible cannot be understood are mistaken. See also Mark 7:14; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Acts 17:11; Ephesians 3:3-5; 5:17; 1 Corinthians 14:33; Isaiah 55:11; Psalm 119:104,105,130; 1 Timothy 2:4.

Verses 13-15

11. What happened on the next day? What did they learn as they studied?
12. List other **passages** about this feast, and explain its meaning.

### **The people learn about the feast of the tabernacles**

On the next day there was another meeting to read the law, the heads of the houses this time meeting with Ezra, the priests, and the Levites. Note that one day of reading and studying the law was not enough. In fact, we will see that they met together to read and study the law all week long during the feast of tabernacles. This is similar to what we would call a gospel meeting. It was a special concentrated time of reading and studying God’s law.

As they studied, they read the Scriptures where God revealed that, in the 7<sup>th</sup> month, there should also be another feast, the feast of tabernacles or booths. This is mentioned in Lev. 23:33-44 (Deut. 16:13-17; cf. Neh. 8:14ff). This feast began on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month and lasted for seven days. The people were to get branches from various trees (olive, myrtle, palm, etc.) to make booths (temporary dwelling places). This was a reminder of the time when they were dwelling in temporary dwelling places in the wilderness after they left Egypt. Many offerings were associated with each day of the Feast of Tabernacles, as listed in Num. 29:12-38.

Verses 16-18

13. What did the people do regarding this feast?

14. Cf. Ezra 6:19-22. List again lessons we can learn from these events about restoring our service to God.

### *The people keep the feast of tabernacles*

Having read the command of the law, the people obeyed. They built booths on the roofs of their houses, or in courtyards, or in the open square before the gates. All the people participated.

The result was that the feast was kept as it had not been since the time of Joshua. This might appear to mean that this feast had not been kept at all since Joshua's time, but that would appear to contradict 2 Chronicles 8:12,13; Ezra 3:4; etc. So another possibility is that the statement could mean no one kept it *in this way* since the time of Joshua (note "so").

Since these people had recently come out of Babylonian captivity, perhaps this feast had special meaning to them as they identified with their fathers who came out of Egyptian captivity. In any case, it was a time of great gladness, which was what God had commanded at this feast (see on vv 9-12 above).

The feast lasted seven days, and on each day the people continued to read the law. On the eighth day they had a special assembly as was commanded for this feast. Note how they continued to want to read and study the law. If they could study for hours per day for a week, surely we can study for a few hours on the first day of the week and other times as well.

### *Restoration of God's service*

Cf. Ezra 6:19-22.

Note that the people here restored an act of service to God that had been neglected for years. When we see how they restored it, we will understand the principle of restoration according to the written word. We will see how we can restore all aspects of our service to God as they were in the New Testament, even though it may have been many generations since others did it properly. This requires:

#### **1. The people followed the source of guidance for knowing God's will: the written word.**

Note that Moses' words had been written a thousand years earlier and had been neglected for many years at a time in the interim. Yet by diligently studying and following it, the people were still able to restore their service. We can do the same today, despite the fact it has been two thousand years since the New Testament was completed, and despite the fact people have been in apostasy for years at times since then.

#### **2. To help understand, teachers assembled the people, read the law, and explained the meaning of it.**

We need teachers today who will show the same dedication.

#### **3. People attended the assemblies and listened attentively.**

Restoration today likewise requires the people to have the same commitment and willingness to learn.

#### **4. The people were thus able to understand the written word which they studied.**

People often tell us that the Bible was written hundreds of years ago so we can't understand it, and besides it is out of date and has no application today. Yet the same things would have applied in Nehemiah' day, but the people could understand and the law did apply. We can do the same today.

## 5. The people then obeyed what was written, and the worship was restored.

This worked despite the fact the law had been written 1000 years earlier and had been neglected for years. The same will work today. The power is in the seed to make Christians and restore Jesus' church anytime, anywhere. See 1 Peter 1:22-25; Galatians 6:7,8.

### Notes on Nehemiah 9

## II. Review of the History of Israel – Chap. 9

### Step 10 in usefulness to God: Lead people to recognize and repent of sin.

Verses 1-3

1. What did the people do on the 24<sup>th</sup> day? What were some specific things they did (v1)? (Think: What is the significance of these acts?)
2. What else did they do (v2)? Explain and give other Scriptures regarding separation from foreigners?
3. What else did they do (v3)? How long did this take? (Think: What can we learn regarding willingness to worship God?)
4. Why is confession of sin important? Give other *passages*.

### *A special assembly of the people to worship and confess to God*

Again on the 24th day of this 7th month, the people were assembled, fasting, and indicating sorrow by wearing sackcloth and dust on their heads. The feast of the tabernacles in chap. 8 had taken from the 15<sup>th</sup> through the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of the month, with the assembly of the eighth day of the feast occurring on the 22<sup>nd</sup> (Lev. 23:34ff). This means that this meeting on the 24<sup>th</sup> must have been a separate voluntary meeting not required by any feast day.

The people separated themselves from foreigners (cf. Nehemiah 13:1-3; Ezra chapters 9 & 10; Deuteronomy 23:3-6). This could refer to specific separation from foreign wives, as in Ezra 9 & 10. Or it may mean they did not make alliances with these foreigners. Or perhaps it means in general that they turned away from all evil influences among these people.

The people took ¼ of the day to read the book of the law of God and then another ¼ of the day to confess their sins and worship God. So they spent half their day in this special voluntary period of worship and study even after they had spent the eight days of the Feast of the Tabernacles in reading the law and worshipping (8:18). This shows the zeal and desire of the people to communicate with God. We need such zeal among God's people today. Too many do not want to spend more than an hour a week in worship and study, and many won't do that much.

In particular, confession of sins is vital if we expect God to accept our worship. See Acts 8:22; Matthew 6:12; 21:28-32; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 1 John 1:8-10; Proverbs 28:13. God will not accept worship from those who claim to be His children but who disobey His word and will not repent (1 John 2:15-17; Romans. 12:1,2; James 4:4; etc.).

Verses 4-15

5. Vv 5-15 describe the praise of God, then vv 16-38 describe the people's confession of sin and God's reaction. From vv 5-15 list at least 7 characteristics of God and 7 works of God. Then list other *passages* about them:

### *Praise of God's Greatness*

#### Leaders begin the period of worship

This confession and worship was led by the men named in vv 4,5. They stood on the stairs (presumably so people could see and hear them), then cried aloud and led the people in praising God. They called on the people to stand up and bless (praise) the Lord God.

They then began the prayer of confession and praise by honoring God whose name is exalted so high we cannot bless and praise Him highly enough. God's name stands for the Person and all He is. To praise God's name is to praise Him Himself (see 1 Chron. 29:13; Matthew 6:9).

### **God is Lord because God is Creator.**

God is praised as the only true Lord. He is Lord because He made heaven and the host of heaven (the heavenly bodies), the earth and sea and everything in them. As Creator of all, He deserves the praise and service of all that He created. Note that God's place as God and Ruler is the consequence of His work as Creator. To deny or doubt His power as Creator is to deny or undermine respect for His right to rule. See Genesis chap. 1; Exodus 20:11; Psalm 33:6-9; 102:25; 89:11; 90:2; 104:5-9,24-28; 19:1; 24:1,2; 95:5; 146:6; 136:5-9; 8:3,6-8; 148:5; Jeremiah 10:12; 27:5; John 1:1-3; Acts 14:15; 17:24; Isaiah 42:5; 45:18; 40:26; Hebrews 1:10; 11:3.

He not only *made* everything, but He *preserves* all that He made (Psalms 36:6; Colossians 1:17). He upholds the continued existence of that which He made. If He were to cease willing them to exist, they would all immediately perish. The fact the world continues to stand is proof of God's continued existence, just as the origin of the world is the proof of His authority over all.

The host of heaven (heavenly bodies) worship Him, not in the sense that they consciously, knowingly praise Him as intelligent beings would do, but their very existence shows forth His power and greatness and thereby honor Him.

### **God's covenant with Abraham**

Just as the creation showed reason to praise God, so does the history of His dealings with man, especially the descendants of Abraham. So the people praised God for the great things done for their ancestors, starting with Abraham. Throughout their history, Jews have loved to recount the story of Abraham and God's subsequent blessings to him. This is the basis for their claim to be God's special people, which indeed they were during the Old Testament.

God chose Abraham and called him out of the land of Ur and brought him to the land of Canaan (Gen. 11:31; 12:1ff). Because of Abraham's faithfulness (Gen. 15:6; chap. 22, especially v16), God changed his name to Abraham, meaning a father of many nations (Gen. 17:5). God made the covenant with him (Gen. 15:18-21) to give to his descendants the land of Canaan, including the territory of all the nations specified – these are the same nations repeatedly specified as occupying the territory God would give Israel.

Because God is righteous, He performed these words. This clearly means that the Israelites received the land God promised. This was done in the past – i.e., prior to Nehemiah 9; it was not something to happen yet in the future. See also vv 23,24; Josh. 21:43-45; 23:14. This proves the error of modern premillennialists, who claim Israel still has not received the land fully, but will receive it at Jesus' second coming. The consequence of this view, according to the context here, is that **God is not righteous!**

For further information, see our articles about premillennialism at our Bible Instruction web site at [www.gospelway.com/instruct/](http://www.gospelway.com/instruct/).

### **God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage**

As time passed, God also blessed the Israelites who had been captives in Egypt. He saw their affliction and heard their cry (Ex. 2:22-25; 3:7). God performed great wonders against Pharaoh and all the Egyptians (the 10 plagues – Ex. chap. 7-14). He did this because they had acted proudly against Him, thinking He could not overpower them. By His great miracles, He made a name for Himself (Jer. 32:20).

So God led the people from captivity. He parted the Red Sea so the people passed through on dry land, but the enemies were destroyed (Ex. 14:20-31). He then led them by pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (Ex. 13:21,22).

All this showed God's power and exalted His name before the world. And all this gave Israel great reason to honor and serve Him. But we will see that they were not faithful, which is the ultimate point of this history.

### **God gave Israel the law and provided for them in the wilderness.**

God then revealed His law to the people at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19,20), a good and just law (Rom. 7:12). This law included the Sabbath (Ex. 16:23; 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:13-17; cf. Gen. 2:3) and other precepts and statutes given through Moses. God also fed them with manna in the wilderness (Ex. 16), and gave them water from the rock (Ex. 17:6; Num. 20:8-11). He led them to the land He had sworn to give them and told them to go in to possess it (Deut. 1:8; Num. 13,14).

The expression "made known" surely seems to imply that the people had not known the Sabbath prior to the giving of the law, at least it was not revealed prior to that time that the people were to observe it. The first time we read of people being told to observe the Sabbath was regarding the gathering of manna (Ex. 16). Though this happened shortly before their arrival at Mt. Sinai, it was in the wilderness near to Sinai (Ex. 16:1) and the context probably refers to the whole period in which God gave the law.

If this is the correct conclusion, then God rested on the seventh day of creation and that is the reason He hallowed it (Gen. 2:3), but it was not till later at Mt. Sinai that He revealed that man should keep it. In any case, it is clear from the passages listed above that He addressed the command specifically to the nation of Israel. No one else has ever been required to keep the Sabbath, and no one is required to keep it now that the Old Testament has been removed (Hebrews 10:1-10; 7:11-14; 8:6-13; 9:1-4; 2 Corinthians 3:6-11; Galatians 3:24,25; 5:1-6; Romans 7:1-7; Ephesians 2:11-16; Colossians 2:13-17).

For further information, see our articles about the old law today at our Bible Instruction web site at [www.gospelway.com/instruct/](http://www.gospelway.com/instruct/).

### **Summary of God's qualities and works**

Note from the things the people have spoken, some of the great qualities of God that the people were praising, and some of the works He has done that prove He has these qualities. We too should praise God in these same ways for these same reasons:

**Characteristics:** Power, Wisdom, Uniqueness (one God), Righteousness, Faithfulness to promises, Love, care, concern, Justice, Guidance/authority, Provision, Grace, mercy, forgiveness,

**Works:** Creation, Preservation, Covenant with Abraham, Plagues on Egypt, Crossing Red Sea, Pillar of cloud/fire, Gave law, Food & water, Canaan land, Great nation

Verses 16-18

6. After God blessed Israel (vv 8-15), how did Israel respond (v16)? What specific examples of this rebellion are mentioned (vv 17,18)? Give **b/c/v** about these.

### **Corruption of Israel**

Having told how great and good God was, the people now confess how corrupt their fathers had been.

### **The people refused to obey.**

The people confess that their ancestors had acted proudly. They hardened their necks – i.e., they were stubborn (Deut. 1:26-33; 31:27). They did not obey God's commands and did not remember the good He had done them (Psalms 106:6; 78:11,42-45).

Specifically, they refused to enter the promised land, but appointed a leader and wanted to return to Egypt (Num 14:4; Acts 7:39). Imagine how offensive this was to God. Here He made



such great efforts and did such great miracles to get them out of Egypt to Canaan, and what do the people do when they get there? They refuse to enter and want to go back to the place He just led them out of! Consider how this is like some people today. God sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross to lead them out of the curses of sin. And what do the people do? They feel sorry for themselves and think they were better off before they were converted!

Also they worshiped a golden calf saying it was the God that brought them from Egypt (Ex. 32:4-8,31). God did such great things for them, and what did they do? They made an image and attributed all these great works to an idol they made with their own hands. They had committed this great sin even as Moses was on the mountain receiving God's law! Imagine how God must have felt about this!

Yet even so, God was gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness. He did not forsake them despite their sins (Joel 2:13). He punished them and demanded repentance, but He did not destroy them as He had the right to do.

Verses 19-21

7. How did God deal with them in response (v19)? What specific blessings did He give (vv 20,21)?

### **God's continued goodness**

Yet for all their evil provocations, God did not completely give up on them, as they deserved (Psalms 106:45). He continued to lead them through the wilderness by the pillar of cloud and fire. He also guided them by the Spirit; this refers to the inspiration of the prophets that taught them – see v30; Num. 11:17. And despite their sins, He gave them the manna and water for 40 years sustaining them as they wandered in the wilderness as punishment for their sins. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell (Deut. 8:4; 29:5). They had none of the problems you would expect on such a long journey. God provided all they needed.

The contrast is between a righteous God and unrighteous people!

Verses 22-25

8. What did God do when they reached Canaan (vv 22-25)? List some specific things they received.

9. Explain the connection between vv 22-25 and vv 7,8.

### **God gave Israel the land promised to Abraham.**

God continued to give the people blessings after they wandered in the wilderness. He led them to the promised land and gave them the nations of the people who had been there, beginning with the lands of Sihon, king of Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan (Num. 21:21-35).

They became a great nation of many people like the sand of the seashore as promised to Abraham (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; Heb. 11:12). And again the people plainly state that God did give them the land. We are expressly told that God led them into the land He had told the fathers to go in and possess. So the people went in and possessed the land. God subdued the inhabitants before them and gave Israel the people and the land. See notes on vv 7,8. Again this proves the people did receive the land as promised to Abraham, which in turn disproves premillennialism. Cf. Josh. 1:2-4; 18:1; Psalms 44:2,3.

The land was prepared for them to live in without the need for them to work to prepare the land. They took cities, houses, goods, cisterns already dug, vineyards, olives groves, etc. All this happened because of the goodness of God, and the people grew fat (Deut. 32:15) and delighted in that goodness (Hosea 3:5).

Verse 26

10. What did Israel do after God so blessed them (v26)? Give **b/c/v**.

### **The people's return to evil**

For all God's goodness, the people still disobeyed and rebelled against God and cast the law behind their backs (Judges 2:11; 1 Kings 14:9; Psalms 50:17). What is worse, they even killed the messengers (prophets) God sent to tell them to repent. God knew the people were disobeying Him, He sent warnings, and what did the people do? They killed the messengers!

We are often told of the people doing this (Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:52; 1 Kings 18:4ff; 19:10). We read such records and tend to take it as a matter of course. But imagine being one of the prophets! We get upset if somebody gets mad at us or ceases to be our friend because we talk to them about Jesus. Surely God was greatly provoked.

Compared to God's character and works, as before, note the character and works of the people:

**Character:** Proud, Stubborn, Disobedient, Ungrateful

**Works:** Refused to enter the land, Worshipped the golden calf, Killed prophets

Verses 27-29

11. Describe the punishment God gave Israel for their disobedience (vv 27-29). (Think: When did this happen?)

### **Further Punishment of the People**

#### **God allowed enemies to oppress the people**

God punished the people by allowing enemies to defeat them (Judges 2:14; Psalms 106:41). They would then repent and God would deliver them (Judges 2:18; Psalms 106:44). But then the people would go back into sin after awhile. So God would leave them in the hands of their oppressors, hoping this would teach them a lesson (Judges 3:12; Psalms 106:43). They would then finally repent and call on God, so He would again show them mercy and deliver them. This was a cycle continually repeated in the times of the judges and kings. Having delivered them from enemies, God warned them to obey, but they refused and stubbornly, proudly refused to listen.

The law requires that, in order to live, one must do what the law said (cf. Leviticus 18:5; Gal. 3:12). The wages of sin is death (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans. 6:23; Genesis 2:16f). Often the law required physical death. But even more important is that spiritual death is the consequence of sin. If one wanted to have a relationship with God (often called spiritual life), one had to obey. If he sinned, he was cut off (death).

So under the system of the law, the only way to avoid that death was to live without sin. Even one sin would condemn to death before God. So only those who lived sinlessly could live. But the people repeatedly refused to obey. Again, they shrugged their shoulders, stiffened their necks, and would not listen (see v26).

This is the main lesson of the Old Testament. We should not think we are much better. We too sin again and again and need God's patient forgiveness. One main lesson we should learn from these accounts is our own sinfulness and our own need for God's mercy. The law ultimately could not provide forgiveness for the people, so why should we today want to return to that law? We need a system of forgiveness through Jesus. But we also need to learn the importance of obedience and the terribleness of sin.

Verses 30-32

12. Why did God not automatically destroy Israel (v31)? What troubles of the people specifically are mentioned (v32)?

### **God bore patiently with the people for many years.**

This pattern of rebellion by the people continued for many years. Yet God, in mercy, did not completely destroy the people. He continued to testify to them of their sins by means of the messages sent them by the Holy Spirit through the prophets (see notes on v20; 2 Kings 17:13-18; 2 Chronicles 36:11-20; Jeremiah 7:25; Acts 7:51; 1 Peter 1:11; 2 Peter 1:20,21). Note that the Old Testament expressly says that the prophets were guided by God's Holy Spirit. This is confirmed by the New Testament, which then claims the same inspiration for the New Testament apostles and prophets.

Also God continued to deliver them to their enemies. But despite these punishments, God's mercy led Him to continue to spare a remnant of the people. He did not completely consume them, because He is a God of compassion and mercy (Jeremiah 4:27).

The people in Nehemiah's day knew this had happened in ancient times. But it had also happened more recently. Their recent ancestors and rulers had been led to captivity by Assyria and Babylon. So they then called upon God to show mercy upon them and spare them. They urged Him not to consider their needs and troubles to be insignificant. They too needed God's mercy (2 Kings 15:19; 17:3-6; Ezra 4:2,10).

Verses 33-35

13. How did the people compare the conduct of Israel to God's conduct (vv 33-35)?

### **The people confess their own unrighteousness**

This entire history is summarized in v33: God had been just and faithful in dealing with the people, but they had done wickedly (Psalms 119:137; 106:6; Daniel 9:14,5-8). That in a nutshell is the point of the context. God had repeatedly revealed His will, warned the people, and shown them mercy when they repented. Yet they had repeatedly turned from His will to do evil. That is surely the history of Israel, and even today it is the history of God's people. Let us learn, as they needed to learn, to turn from sin and confess our own errors.

They openly said that their own kings, priests, and ancestors had failed to obey God's law. They had not served God, though He had given them so many good things in the land He gave them. They continued to sin and often would not turn from their sins.

Verses 36-38

14. How did the Jews summarize their current circumstances (vv 36,37)?

15. What did they intend to do about this (v38)?

### **The people renew their covenant commitment to serve God.**

The people then stood before God as His servants. God had graciously moved the Persians to allow them to return, so they were now back in the land God had given their fathers (Ezra 9:9). They were again enjoying its bounty, even as their fathers had. The land gave its increase.

But the people realized they were not ultimately free to enjoy the blessings of the land. They were still subject to foreign kings (the Persians). Because of their sins, much of the bounty of the land went to the foreign rulers. These rulers had dominion over the people and their animals. So they were in great distress (Deut. 28:33,51,48). Just as their ancestors had suffered at the hands of foreign oppressors and then had repented, so these people were being oppressed and had come to God to confess sin and repent.

But they determined to go further and to renew the covenant with God. They volunteered to make a covenant with God and write it down. Their leaders, the priests and Levites, would lead the people in it and would seal it with official approval. (2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chronicles 29:10; Ezra 10:3; Nehemiah 10:1)

Events in the following chapter describe the sealing of the covenant and the people's commitment to it. So all this was apparently written down as their covenant commitment to return to serving God. Of course, it is written here for us, but it was apparently also written in their day as a reminder of their serious need to serve God.

## Notes on Nehemiah 10

### III. The People's Covenant to Serve God – Chap. 10

#### Step #11 in useful service to God: Lead people to commit themselves to obey God

Verses 1-27

1. What was done by the people named in vv 1-27? What is the significance of this act?

#### *The leaders who sealed the covenant*

In 9:38 we were told that the people had determined to make a written covenant with God. This was to be sealed by the leaders (princes), Levites, and priests. In this chapter we are told who sealed it and what the covenant contained.

First, vv 1-27 list the names of those who sealed the covenant. The list includes Nehemiah the governor (v1) followed by specific priests (vv 1-8), then Levites (vv 9-13), and then the leaders or princes (vv 14-26).

To “seal” a covenant was to officially ratify it. It may be compared to signing ones name to a contract today. In fact, these men may have physically signed this covenant, but in any case they by some means agreed to have their names attached to the terms of the covenant.

Note how this commits a person to a matter. This was not just a minor promise made by these people. They signed their names to a written covenant. The New Testament does not require such a signature, but one who commits himself must seal his covenant commitment by baptism (cf. Rom. 6).

Verses 28,29

2. Who else joined in this commitment (vv 28,29)? What did they commit themselves to do?

3. Application: In what ways is this similar to our own commitment to serve God under the New Testament? Who should make this commitment?

#### *The other people join in the covenant*

The rest of the people did not apparently actually sign the covenant, but they still committed themselves to abide by its terms. This included the people, the priests, and the Levites (presumably the “rest” of these groups other than those who signed it).

Also included were the gatekeepers and singers – see on Nehemiah 7:1. Also mentioned were the Nethinim. These were temple servants who had been appointed by David to help the Levites in their work (see on Ezra 8:20; 2:43-58).

All these people committed themselves to separate from the people of the land to do God's law (cf. 9:2). Also included were their wives, sons, and daughters, all who had knowledge and understanding. This would include all who were capable of accepting the responsibility for making the commitment to keep the covenant and obey the commands (v29).

Note the similarity here to the New Testament concept of “age of accountability.” In the New Testament, before accepting the commitment of covenant relationship with God, sons and daughters must be old enough to know and understand the commitment they are making and to make it by their own free choice. See Mark 16:15,16; John 6:44,45; Acts 2:36,41; Galatians 3:26,27; Acts 8:12; 2:38; Romans 10:9,10; Acts 8:35-39.

## ***The commitment to obey God***

V29 describes in general terms what the people were committing themselves to do. They entered into a curse and an oath to obey God's Law, given by Moses, and to observe all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord (2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chronicles 34:31). In chap. 9 the people had confessed at great length their past failure to keep God's law despite all His goodness to them. Having repented and confessed these sins, the people here made a solemn covenant to keep God's law in the future.

This involved an oath (solemn vow or promise) to keep the covenant along with a curse – a statement acknowledging the penalty upon them if they disobeyed. See Deut. 29:12; Neh. 5:12; Psalms 119:106.

Again, while the New Testament does not require a vow as such, when we become Christians we are making just as solemn a commitment to obey God. In fact, such a commitment is the essence of conversion and of spiritual restoration from sin. One who has not been serving God must recognize his error, commit himself to turn from error (repentance), confess it, and then begin to practice what is right. This is what these people did.

All this resulted from their study of God's word (chap. 8,9) and their recognition of God's goodness and their own sins. Note they were committing themselves to follow God's laws, written 1000 years or so earlier by Moses. This written word (Scripture) still had power to guide them, and they still had power to understand it.

People sometimes today claim we cannot understand the Bible or it has no effect today, since we live 2000 years after it was written. Or they claim we cannot restore God's service today since people have been in error for long periods of time, etc. But all the reasons why restoration will not work today would have applied in Nehemiah's day. And all the reasons why it did work then are reasons why we can be sure it will work today. All we must do is study God's word, turn from sin, and commit ourselves to truly obey.

Verses 30,31

4. What did they promise to do in v30? Where else have we studied this?
5. What promises did they make in v31? List other **passages** regarding the Sabbath day and explain what it involved.
6. Where else have we read about rules for debts? Explain the laws regarding the seventh year and exacting debts.

Having committed themselves to obey God's law in general, the people then specified certain requirements of the law that they intended to keep. These presumably involved matters that they had not been properly observing.

Note that we today must likewise realize that we cannot please God simply by professing a general adherence to God's law. We must follow through with observing specific laws given by God, else our general commitment is meaningless.

### ***Specifics of the covenant: separation from surrounding nations***

They committed themselves not to intermarry with people of the land. They would not give their daughters as wives to the people of the land, nor would they take the daughters of the land to marry their sons. Such marriages were expressly forbidden by the law, because the people of God would be influenced to participate in idolatry and other sins common among the inhabitants of the land. Yet such intermarriage was a common problem among the returned captives. See notes on Ezra 9,10; cf. Ex. 34:12-16; Deut. 7:1-3.

### ***Observance of the holy days, including the Sabbath***

The people also agreed that they would not do business on the Sabbath day. Specifically, they would not buy and sell wares with the people of the land on the Sabbath or any other holy day. God had commanded Israel to rest on the Sabbath, and specifically not to do business on

that day. Many other holy days also involved days of rest. The people agreed to observe these laws. See Exodus 20:8; 34:21; 31:12-17; Lev. 23:3,8; Deut. 5:12; Jer. 17:27.

Note that the Sabbath law was associated with the holy days, as it is so often done in the Old Testament (see v33), and with laws of the seventh-year rest and release of debts. If the other holy days and other laws are not binding under the New Testament, why should we think the Sabbath is still binding? See Colossians 2:13-17; Hebrews 10:1-10; 7:11-14; 8:6-13; 9:1-4; 2 Corinthians 3:6-11; Galatians 3:24,25; 5:1-6; Romans 7:1-7; Ephesians 2:11-16.

For further information, see our articles about the Sabbath and the old law at our Bible Instruction web site at [www.gospelway.com/instruct/](http://www.gospelway.com/instruct/).

### **Observance of the seventh-year sabbath and release**

They also determined to “forego the seventh year’s produce” and the exacting of debts. This refers to the fact that the law required every seventh year the land would not be planted but would be allowed to rest – Exodus 23:10,11; Lev. 25:4. Also on the seventh year all Israelite slaves were to be released – Jer. 34:14 (see discussion on Neh. 5). Also there was a release of debts on the seventh year (Deut. 15:1-6). On the year of jubilee every 50 years all property was returned. But the seventh-year release appears to be something different. Perhaps in that year people did not have to make payments on their debts, since they would have so much less income as a result of not planting and harvesting their crops. The people covenanted to observe these laws.

Verses 32,33

7. What assessment did the people agree to pay in vv 32,33? What would it be used for?

### **Payment for the service in the temple**

The people then made ordinances for themselves to arrange to provide funds needed to do the work in the temple. This involved providing for the showbread, the regular burnt offerings on the Sabbath and the holy days, etc., and for all the work in the temple. To provide for this they determined to give 1/3 shekel per year (per person).

In Exodus 30:11-16; 38:25,26 the people had given 1/2 shekel in Moses’ day for the tabernacle service. However, this does not appear to have been a yearly or annual payment (but note 2 Chron. 24:6,9). But here in Nehemiah the people apparently determined to make an annual payment. This appears to be a voluntary decision of the people to support the work in the tabernacle, not required by the law itself, but determined by the people as part of their covenant (like the arrangements for the wood in v34). On the other hand, if the tax in Moses’ day was an annual requirement, they people were here just agreeing to abide by it, as with the other laws in the list. But in that case, I don’t understand the slight difference in the amount of the tax. See Matt. 17:24ff.

Verse 34

8. What arrangements were provided for in v34?

### **Wood for temple service**

Another need for the temple service was wood to burn on the altar in the sacrifices (Lev. 6:12). This need was met by determining to cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people to take turns from time to time to bring in wood as needed. See also Nehemiah 13:31. Again, this was decided as part of the covenant of the people with God.

Verses 35-37

9. What ordinances were agreed upon in vv 35-37? Explain the law regarding the first-born and explain its origin.
10. What were the tithes and why were they given?

### *The firstfruits and the firstborn and the tithes*

The people also agreed to obey the laws of God regarding giving Him the firstfruits of the harvest and the firstborn of the people and animals.

Every year the people were required to give to God the firstfruits of the harvest from the ground, the trees and vineyards, etc. This was to be given to support the priests. See the commands in Ex. 23:19; 34:26; Num. 18:12; Deut. 18:4; 26:1,2. The reference to the dough in v37 perhaps refers to the fact that sometimes the firstfruits of the grain was ground to flour and used to make dough for bread, then it was offered as part of a heave offering. See also Num. 15:19.

The firstborn children and firstborn animals were also to be given to God's service. This was taught in Ex 22:29f as a consequence of the fact God spared the firstborn of Israel when He slew the firstborn Egyptians to persuade Egypt to allow Israel to go free. From then on God claimed the firstborn as His. Later, however, He accepted the tribe of Levi as His special servants in exchange for the firstborn human sons, but still the people had to bring a special sacrifice and pay a redemption fee at the birth of a firstborn. See Num. 3:12-51; 18:13-20. The firstborn animals were to be sacrificed to God unless they were not suitable for sacrifices, in which case a redemption fee was paid. The reference here must be that the people agreed to bring the firstborn sons and animals to the temple to give the offerings and pay the redemption fees. See Ex. 13:11-15; Lev. 27:26,27. Note also Luke 2:22-24 regarding the sacrifice offered at Jesus' birth.

They also agreed to bring to the Lord the heave offerings the law required and to pay the tithes. The tithes were one tenth of their income, which was to be paid for the support of the Levites (Lev. 27:30-33; Num. 18:21-32; Malachi 3:10).

The people agreed to bring all these to the temple to be placed there in the storerooms till needed.

Verses 38,39

11. Where were the gifts of v39 to be stored?

Num 18:26 showed that, when the Levites received the tithes from the people, they were in turn to give a tithe (tenth) of that to support the priests in the temple. So here in Nehemiah the Levites agreed to do this, bringing it to the temple to be placed in the storerooms. This was done under the supervision of the high priest descended from Aaron.

Also the other offerings of the people, whether grain, wine, or oil, would be brought to the storerooms and kept there for use in the temple service. This is where the priests, gatekeepers, and singers were. All this was to insure that the service to God in the temple was not neglected. Deut. 12:6,11; 1 Chron. 9:26; 2 Chron. 31:11,12; Neh. 13:12.

## Notes on Nehemiah 11

### IV. The People Who Dwelt in the City – Chap. 11

Verses 1,2

1. Where did the leaders of the people live? Where did the other people live?
2. How did they decide where people would live? Explain casting lots and give examples.

#### ***2. How did they decide where people would live? Explain casting lots and give examples. The need for people to live in the city***

Since Jerusalem's walls had been rebuilt, it was necessary for a sufficient number of people to inhabit the city. Perhaps this included people to defend the city, carry on business, etc.

The leaders of the people already dwelt in the city, as you might expect for the capital city. But it was decided that they needed one tenth of other people in the city, so they cast lots to decide which people would live there. The other nine tenths were to dwell in the other cities of the land. For more information about casting lots see Nehemiah 10:34; 11:1; Acts 1:24-26; Leviticus 16:8; Joshua 14:2; 1 Samuel 14:41,42; Proverbs 16:33 (Psalms 22:18).

Since this required many people to make sacrifices (such as moving and perhaps leaving ones inherited possession in the land – cf. v3), the people who were willing to live in Jerusalem were blessed and appreciated by the other people. (I wonder if the reference to “willingly offered” means that some people simply volunteered to go. If so, did this reduce the need for others to go as a result of the lots?)

Verses 3-36

3. What information is given in 11:3-36?

#### ***People of Judah who lived in Jerusalem***

Many people of various kinds lived in other cities according to their inheritance, but the following verses then list the chief people who lived in Jerusalem. Many were of descendants of Judah, others were of the tribe of Benjamin.

Vv 4-6 specifically lists leaders of the tribe of Judah who lived in Jerusalem. A total of 468 valiant men lived there (one wonders if this counted only those who were of military age, since that was done in other censuses).

#### ***People of Benjamin who lived in Jerusalem***

Verses 7-9 then list leaders of the people of the tribe of Benjamin who lived in Jerusalem. The total men of the tribe of Benjamin was 928. Their overseers in the city were Joel and the second in command was Judah.

#### ***Priests who lived in Jerusalem.***

Verses 10-14 list leaders of the priests who lived in Jerusalem. The numbers in this case are 822, 242, and 128, but I am not sure exactly what the distinction was between these different numbers.

The priests, of course, had to be descendants of Aaron, and they led in the worship in the temple (v11).

#### ***Levites who lived in Jerusalem***

Verses 15-18 then list the leaders of the Levites who lived in Jerusalem. These had oversight of the business outside the temple (v16). Remember that Levites could not serve inside the temple and could not touch the holy articles. So they served outside.

In addition Mattaniah is named (v17) as leading the thanksgiving in prayer. The total Levites were 284.



### **Other groups – verses 19-21**

The gatekeepers or porters guarded the gates of the city. There were 172 of them.

The rest of the people lived in their various family inheritances throughout the land. This included other priests and Levites.

Also the Nethinim lived in a place named Ophel. The Nethinim were people who assisted the Levites in their jobs around the temple. See on Ezra 8:20.

### **The singers – verses 22,23**

The overseer of the Levites at Jerusalem was a man named Uzzi. He was also a descendant of Asaph, so he was one of the singers in charge of the worship in the temple.

Further information is given telling that the king had commanded a daily income to be appointed for the singers who led the worship in the temple.

### **The king's deputy**

V24 states that the deputy of the king was a man named Pethahiah of the tribe of Judah. He apparently represented the Persian king in all matters concerning the people. Though the Israelites had been allowed to return to Judah, the king of Persia still maintained power over them. This man was apparently his appointed representative.

### **People living in the other cities of Judah**

Verses 25-36 simply list other cities where various Jews lived. Vv 25-30 list cities where people of Judah lived. They generally lived south of Jerusalem (v30). Vv 31-36 list verses where people of Benjamin lived.

We are also told that some of the Levites that had been assigned to Judea lived in the territory of Benjamin.

## **Notes on Nehemiah 12**

### **V. The Dedication of the Wall – Chap. 12**

#### **A. A Genealogy of the Priests and Levites**

Verses 1-11

1. What information is given in 12:1-11?

#### **List of the priests who returned with Zerubbabel**

Vv 1-26 names the priests and Levites who had returned with Zerubbabel in the first group, along with some of their descendants. Perhaps these lists are included because the priests and Levites led in the celebration of the wall in the last part of this chapter.

Vv 1-7 lists the heads of the priests in the days of Jeshua, who came up with Zerubbabel. Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7:6ff had listed some of the people in general who returned with Zerubbabel. These verses list the leaders of the priests in that group.

#### **The Levites who came with Zerubbabel and Jeshua**

The priests were of the tribe of Levi, but the other Levites were assigned to help the priests in their work in the temple. Verses 8-11 list Levites with Jeshua, the high priest who had come with Zerubbabel.

It includes those who led in the praises and thanksgiving to God (v8). It also lists the descendants of Jeshua, who would also have served as priests, perhaps as high priests.

Verses 12-26

2. What information is given in 12:12-26?

### ***Priests who were in the days of Jeshua's son Joiakim***

V10 says that Jeshua's son was Joiakim. Verses 12-21 list the priests who served in the days of Joiakim. These appear to be the sons of the priests listed in vv 1-7.

### ***Priests during the days of Joiakim's son Eliashib and his sons***

Vv 10,11 listed the descendants of Jeshua, including his son Joiakim and Joiakim's son Eliashib, etc. Verses 22,23 simply informs us that a record of the heads of the houses of the priests and Levites were kept during the reign of Darius the Persian in the days of these descendants of Jeshua till Jaddua.

And heads of the houses of the Levites till Eliashib's descendant Johana were written in the book of the chronicles. (I am not sure what chronicles this refers to. I cannot find this information in the Old Testament books of 1 or 2 Chronicles. But the reference here could be to some other chronicles, which may not have been important enough to place in the inspired record.)

### ***List of the Levites of the next generation***

Vv 8,9 had listed leaders of the Levites during the days of Jeshua, including those who led in thanksgiving. Now verses 24-26 list leading men among the Levites who lived during the days of Joiakim, son of Jeshua the priest. These would have been descendants of the Levites named in vv 8,9 and would have lived during the days of Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest and scribe.

Again he lists those who led in giving thanks. These were organized in the manner arranged by David. Also listed are those who were gatekeepers or porters. These would guard the store-rooms (presumably where the gifts described in 10:35-39 were kept).

## **Dedication of the Wall**

Verses 27-29

3. For what purpose did people gather at Jerusalem in 12:27-29?

### ***Levites brought to Jerusalem for the dedication of the wall***

Nehemiah here returns to the discussion of the wall. He describes the celebration that occurred when the wall was dedicated after its completion. Since this was to be a big celebration, the Levites were brought into Jerusalem to lead it. They lived in other villages around Jerusalem (vv 28,29).

The Levites were to lead the thanksgiving and singing at the dedication, also using various instruments of music. Most likely the songs used were religious and involved praise to God. But we remember that the Old Testament expressly allowed for the use of instrumental music in such worship. See 1 Chronicles 25:6; 2 Chronicles 5:13; 7:6. Once again, the contrast to the New Testament, rather than convincing us to use instruments in worship today, shows that God has not approved such for today. When they were allowed in the Old Testament, they were clearly and expressly named and described. If God wants them today, why are they not likewise today named and described?

For further information, see our articles about instrumental music in worship at our Bible Instruction web site at [www.gospelway.com/instruct/](http://www.gospelway.com/instruct/).

Verse 30-37

4. How many groups of celebrants were appointed (v31)? Where did the first group go?
5. What did the people do as they marched?

### *The priests and Levites purified*

In preparation for the dedication ceremony, the priests and Levites performed ceremonial purifications for themselves, the people, the gates, and the wall. No one could participate in any congregational worship if he were ceremonially unclean, and no one could touch what was unclean without himself becoming unclean. The laws of cleanness and uncleanness related to such things as touching a dead body, secretion of various body fluids, etc. Before these leaders could purify others, they first had to purify themselves.

See Ezra 6:20; Nehemiah 13:22,30.

### *The first group of celebrants described*

The celebration consisted of two large groups of choirs or singers who marched around the wall in opposite directions. They apparently both began at one point of the wall, then one group marched in one direction around the wall, while the other group marched in the other direction. Then they met on the other side of the city. As they went, they praised God and gave thanks.

The first group is here described. It was led by Ezra the scribe (v36). From the original meeting place, this group traveled to the right toward the Refuse or Dung gate. Various leaders who went with them are named, and some of the points they passed on the wall are named. Apparently the wall had stairs at one point, at least, that this group had to ascend.

Verses 38,39

6. Which way did the second group go? Who went with them (v38)?

### *The second group described*

Nehemiah accompanied the second group, that marched the opposite direction around the wall. These verses describe some of the gates and towers on the wall that they passed. They too offered thanksgiving as they marched.

Verses 40-43

7. Where did the two groups meet? What did they do when they met (vv 40-43)?

### *The two groups meet at the temple*

The two groups of worshipers then met and worshiped at the temple, the house of God. These verses then name some of the leaders of the group that accompanied Nehemiah. Some played trumpets, and others sang led by a director.

Having met at the temple, they then offered sacrifices to God and rejoiced. Apparently those who marched around the walls were men, but the women and children met them at the temple and joined them in rejoicing and praising God, so that the sound of the rejoicing could be heard a long ways away.

In this way the wall was dedicated, and the people expressed their joy in having completed it. The reason for their joy was attributed to God for His blessings to them.

Verse 44

8. What arrangements were made in 12:44?

### *People appointed various remaining jobs*

Besides the dedication of the wall, the people took the opportunity to appoint other tasks to various people. In particular, some were put in charge of the rooms where the gifts of the people would be stored. These included the offerings, firstfruits, tithes, etc., as required by the law. In chap. 10, as part of their covenant to serve God, the people had promised to bring in these gifts to the temple. The people of Judah likewise rejoiced for the ministry of the priests and Levites.

Verses 45-47

9. Who was provided for in vv 45-47?

### *Portions set aside for the singers and gatekeepers*

The priests and Levites performed the duties that had been assigned to them. But the singers and the gatekeepers had been organized and assigned duties by David and Solomon. In particular, the singers had been led by Asaph. They led the people in praising and thanking God. See 1 Chronicles 25 & 26; 2 Chronicles 29:30.

In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah, portions were given to provide for these singers and for the gatekeepers. They were given a portion for their provision each day. So the Levites and priests and all the spiritual leaders were provided for by the people. See notes on chap. 10; cf. Numbers 18:21,24.

## Notes on Nehemiah 13

### VI. Spiritual Renewal of the People – Chap. 13

#### Step 12 in useful service to God: Remind people of their commitment to God and rebuke disobedience

In Nehemiah 10 the people had renewed their commitment to keep God's law. They had even made a specific covenant to do so. In this chapter Nehemiah tells how the people failed in many ways to keep that covenant, so he had to remind them and insist that they keep the covenant and continue serving God.

Verses 1-3

1. What did the Jews learn from Moses' law? Why was this law given?
2. Tell the story of Balaam. Give **b/c/v** where it is found.

### *Separation of Moabites and Ammonites from the people*

On a certain day (what day I cannot tell), the people read in the Book of Moses that no Ammonite or Moabite could come into the assembly of the people of God. This is recorded in Deut. 23:3-6. The reason given was that these nations had not welcomed the Israelites (with bread and water) when they came to Canaan after leaving Egyptian slavery. Instead, they had hired Balaam to curse Israel (as recorded in Numbers 22,23).

These nations were descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, so they were related to the Israelites. They should have been hospitable and kind to Israel. Instead, they had sought to harm them, even seeking to turn God against them. It did not work, because God turned the curse into a blessing, and eventually Israel captured Canaan despite the opposition of these nations. But God pronounced a curse on them (instead of their curse on Israel), saying they could never enter the assembly of Israel. Apparently this forbade, allowing such people to come into any religious assembly of the nation. Vv 23ff make clear that the people were also forbidden to intermarry with such people.

By reading the law, the people were able to understand this restriction and use it to restore their proper conduct before God. Once again, as earlier discussed, restoration is possible when people will read and obey the law. Though the law had been written many centuries before and had been extensively disobeyed and ignored, yet the people could understand it, obey it, and thereby restore their relationship to God.

The Jews in Nehemiah's day had become lax regarding this law. On reading the law, however, they determined to obey it, so they separated themselves from these forbidden people. Similar language was used in 9:2 and 10:28, where they separated themselves from the people of the land (these were not necessarily Moabites and Ammonites). Note that the people not only

committed sin, but they had problems staying right when they repented. In a few years they would again disobey the same laws.

Disobedience to God's law was bad, but the willingness to repent and obey was praiseworthy. Again, when people have hearts willing to obey God, study of His word reveals how we ought to live.

Verses 4,5

3. Who was Eliashib? Who was Tobiah? Give other **b/c/v** about them.
4. What had Eliashib done for Tobiah? Explain why this was a perversion.
5. Application: What lesson can we learn about the danger that enemies may influence God's people, even leaders?

### ***Tobiah's alliance with Eliashib***

V6 tells us that Nehemiah had been absent from Jerusalem for a time. During this time the people fell into various sins. When he returned, he had to lead the people to repent and keep their covenant regarding God's service.

One problem that reappeared during this time related to one of the old enemies of Nehemiah, namely Tobiah. This Tobiah was an Ammonite, one of the very kind of people that we just read should be put out from the assemblies of God's people. Instead, he was one of the people that the Jews had not separated from as they should have separated. And not only was he an Ammonite, but he had been an enemy who opposed Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the wall, even threatening to do violence against the workers. See on 2:10,19 for other references.

Not only had the people failed to separate from him, but in fact he was an ally of the high priest Eliashib, grandson of Jeshua (cf. 3:1; 12:10). In 6:17-19 we were told that he had allies among God's people who worked to get Nehemiah to accept him. Now we learn how influential these allies were.

Note how strong the influence of evil people can be, and how hard it is to remove that influence when those people have close ties with God's people, especially people in influential places. This is exactly why God had forbidden intermarriage with people of the lands. Such relationships give people influence that continually caused trouble for God's people.

Christians also need to learn this lesson. Evil companions still corrupt good morals (1 Cor. 15:33). We must have the courage to rebuke and stand against such relationships.

Note also how old enemies have a way of coming back to haunt God's people. They may be defeated once or twice, but they have a way of resurfacing to create problems.

### ***Perversion of the temple storerooms***

As high priest, Eliashib was in charge of the storerooms of the temple, the rooms that should have been used to store the meal offerings, vessels, tithes, and other items for support of the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, and singers. These chambers had been built for a specific legitimate purpose relating to the service in the temple. The people had specifically determined, just in 12:44, to use these storerooms for these purposes.

However, Eliashib had taken one of the large storerooms and had allowed Tobiah to use it for his personal purposes. V8 shows that he had put his personal household possessions there. This perverted the purpose of the temple and hindered it from being used for the proper purpose. It also put the people in association with an Ammonite whom God said should have no part in Israel's assemblies.

Note how similar this is to many perversions today among God's people. Local churches today also purchase "chambers" (church buildings) for legitimate purposes of the church: assembling to worship God and study and teach His word. However, many churches today take those chambers and allow them to be used for activities that are no part of the church's work: parties, recreation, entertainment, and social meals. All such activities are perversions of the authorized work of local churches, just as the misuse of the temple storerooms described here.

Verses 6-9

6. Where was Nehemiah when this happened? What did he do when he returned?

7. What act of Jesus does this remind you of? Give **b/c/v**.

8. Application: What lessons can we learn about the church today from Nehemiah's act and Jesus' act?

### *Cleansing the temple storerooms*

Here Nehemiah explained that he was not in Jerusalem when these errors occurred regarding Tobiah. In the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of Artaxerxes (12 years after he had gone to Jerusalem to build the wall – 2:1), he had returned to spend time with the king. This is apparently what the king had expected when Nehemiah went to Jerusalem – 2:6. Then after a time (how long we are not told) he left again for Jerusalem. On returning, he discovered the evil done by Eliashib and Tobiah in the house of God. Note that he clearly identifies this conduct as “evil.”

Note that evil people may be defeated in their cause. But when the leaders are gone, who had firmly opposed them, the enemies may attempt again to assert themselves and regain power without repenting. God's people must be on guard to continually oppose error.

Nehemiah grieved when he learned of the error. Again we are shown the great concern he had for the people. He was touched when their conduct or circumstances were harmful to them. This ought to be how we feel when we see others, especially God's people in sin or suffering.

He then took firm action and solved the problem by simply casting Tobiah's household stuff out of the temple chamber. This was easy enough to do of itself. However, Nehemiah had the advantage of having authority to do it without others harming him for so doing. He did not take the law into his own hands, but rather he administered the law as was his duty to do. Likewise today, those who pervert the purpose of the church must be disciplined if they will not repent.

He then commanded that the temple be cleansed and the rooms returned to their proper purpose for storing the grain offering and other supplies for those who served in the temple.

Note that, not only was Tobiah using a part of the temple grounds for that for which it should not have been used, but also in so doing he was hindering or preventing its use for its proper purpose. While his property remained in the storeroom, it could not be used to store the supplies for the temple workers as it should have been used. The error was both in using it for an unauthorized purpose and hindering its use for authorized work.

This is exactly the same for the unauthorized activities that people often today bring into the work of the church. Such activities as entertainment, recreation, parties, and social meals, when they are brought into the work of the church, inevitably they eventually push out the spiritual work that the church ought to be doing. The church and its members have limits on their time, money, and energy. When the church becomes involved in unauthorized activities with physical and carnal emphasis, like those mentioned, the result will be to limit or hinder the church's involvement in the authorized spiritual activities of worship, teaching, Bible study, and saving the lost. These physical or secular activities may not be wrong for individual to practice, but the church should not waste its resources and facilities on them. When they are introduced into the church activities, they will inevitably progress to more and more secular involvement, pushing out spirituality. The result is denominations today that are so wrapped up in material pursuits that they are nothing more than social clubs and general welfare societies. But it all begins with perversion of church work into some unauthorized secular activity, just as in this story in Nehemiah. We must oppose it from the beginning if we seek to prevent the proliferation of error.

Note the similarity to Jesus who likewise cast out the moneychangers and those who bought and sold from the temple. The problem and the solution were similar to Nehemiah's case. The people had perverted the temple from its authorized spiritual purpose. The solution was to remove the unauthorized activity.

Note the courage that Nehemiah showed in opposing the error. Surely other people had seen that this activity was a violation of the covenant and purpose of the people in chap. 10 and 12, yet so far no one had done anything. We too need the courage to cast out unauthorized activities from Jesus' church. God's faithful servants simply must not stand idly by and allow God's spiritual creations, built for the sake of spiritual purposes, to be perverted for secular and material purposes. We must speak out. And if people will not recognize the error and repent, then we must have the courage to exercise authorized discipline to remove them.

For further information, see our article about church organization and work at our Bible Instruction web site at [www.gospelway.com/instruct/](http://www.gospelway.com/instruct/).

Note that Artaxerxes is called king of Babylon in v6. See Ezra 5:13 where Cyrus was also called king of Babylon. Although these were kings of Persia, evidently they are for some reason also called kings of Babylon. Perhaps it is because they took over the empire from Babylon. Or perhaps they had for a time actually ruled the region of Babylon in their upward ascendancy to power over the whole empire. For whatever, the reason, the language is apparently not a falsehood.

Verses 10,11

9. What other work had been neglected (vv 10,11)? How did this relate to Tobiah's use of the storerooms?
10. Where had the people promised to do this work? What did Nehemiah do about it?

### ***Neglect of support for the temple servants***

The next problem Nehemiah observed was that the Levites and singers (and presumably other temple workers) had not been provided the support (portions) that the law required they be given. This duty to provide for the Levites was part of the covenant that the people had expressly agreed to accomplish in 10:32-39. Here we are just a few years later and they are failing to keep the law of God and to keep the covenant they had so energetically made. Note how easily God's people may become discouraged and begin to neglect the work they commit themselves to do.

Since the temple workers had no support, they had gone back to working in their fields. No doubt they were discouraged, but they also had to have some kind of support. So they had to leave the temple work to obtain income for themselves and their families.

So Nehemiah confronted the rulers of the Jews about this and asked why God's house was forsaken. He then gathered them together and set them again in their place. I can only conclude that this must refer to the workers in the temple who had gone to their fields. He brought them back to the temple to put them in their assigned duties.

All of this also was surely related to Tobiah's use of the storeroom. When the rooms were used for his personal property, they were not available to store the portions to support the temple workers. The two go hand-in-hand: changing the direction of God's work from spiritual activity to material pursuits leads God's people both to involve themselves in things they should not be doing and to neglect things they should be doing.

This is further evidence of the danger of the church today getting involved in unauthorized secular activities. As resources are diverted to these physical pursuits, less and less time, resources, facilities, and effort will be directed toward the authorized spiritual work.

Verses 12-14

11. What else did the people do (v12)? What did Nehemiah do to facilitate this work?

### ***Support for the temple workers restored***

When Nehemiah urged the leaders to return to providing for the temple workers and had cleansed the storerooms and arranged for the workers to return, the people again brought in the provisions to the storehouse. Nehemiah then appointed men to serve as treasurers to be in charge of these provisions to see that they were distributed properly.

V13 names the men appointed and affirms that they were faithful men who would do their work properly. Men appointed to responsible positions among God's people must be trustworthy. In this case there was possibility for theft or misuse of these provisions, so reliable, honest men were needed.

Nehemiah then prayed to God to remember what he had done for the good of the service in the temple. He calls on God to not wipe out or forget what he had done. Of course, God never forgets our good deeds, but Nehemiah is simply calling on God to keep His promises in this matter.

Verses 15-18

12. What other sin did people commit in v15? Where else have we read about this day?

13. Who else joined in this sin (v16)? What did they do?

14. What did Nehemiah say and do regarding this sin (vv 16-18)?

15. Application: In what ways might emphasis on material prosperity hinder worship to God today?

### ***Violations of the Sabbath***

Another error committed by the people then came to Nehemiah's attention. People were violating the Sabbath by working for gain on the seventh day. Such work was expressly forbidden - see Exodus 20:8-11; 31:12-17; etc.

Yet people among the Jews were treading winepresses on the Sabbath, bringing in sheaves of grain, putting them on their donkeys, and carrying various produce and other burdens into Jerusalem and selling them on the Sabbath. Nehemiah warned them about this violation of the seventh day of the week.

Some of the men involved were foreign traders from Tyre, who brought fish and other goods to sell to the inhabitants of Jerusalem on the Sabbath. All this violated, not just the Sabbath law, but also the covenant the people had expressly made in 10:31.

So once again Nehemiah had to contend with the rulers of the people and call them into account for another sin, this time for violation of the Sabbath. He reminded them that sins like this were what had caused God to send the people into captivity. The people knew about this. They had just a few years earlier rebuilt the wall that had been destroyed when they went into captivity. Yet they were repeating the same kinds of errors (cf. Jer. 17:21-27).

How different are people today? We do not have a specific Sabbath command not to work on a certain day of the week, but we do have commands to assemble to worship God. Yet how many people simply choose to pursue material interests when they could arrange to be worshiping God? Many will accept voluntary overtime, keep their businesses open, or schedule themselves to work during church meetings, when they could rearrange their work schedules to attend church meetings. Do they make an effort to trade shifts, avoid voluntary overtime if it conflicts, or even change jobs if necessary to avoid frequently missing? Others choose to attend sports, entertainment, recreation, or musical functions instead of worshiping God and studying his word? How does this differ in principle from those here in Nehemiah who, for their own personal profit, neglected the spiritual service of God? We should be willing to suffer financial loss, if necessary, in order to obey God's commands and worship Him. See Matthew 6:19-33; 16:24-27; Romans 8:5-8; 12:1,2; 2 Corinthians 8:5; 10:3,4; John 6:27,63; Luke 12:15-21; 1 Timothy 6:6-10; Colossians 3:1,2.

Verses 19-22

16. What other measures did Nehemiah take to insure that the traders did not lead the people to violate the Sabbath (vv 19-22)?

### ***Nehemiah's action to promote Sabbath observance***

Nehemiah took steps to prevent people from doing business on the Sabbath. He had already talked to the leaders. Further, he had the gates of the city closed as the Sabbath began when the



day grew dark (days were measured from sundown to sundown). The gates could not be opened again till the Sabbath was over. This would keep people from coming into the city to sell on the Sabbath. He also sent some servants to guard the gates to make sure no burdens were carried in or out on the Sabbath. Cf. Jeremiah 17:21,22.

This kept people from carrying burdens in on the Sabbath; but then the traders simply made camp outside the city gates, waiting to come in as soon as the gates were opened. Nehemiah would not have this either, but rebuked them and warned them that, if they stayed, he would lay hands on them (arrest them). The result was that they altogether ceased to come on the Sabbath.

He then commanded the Levites to accept the responsibility to guard the gates to make sure that the Sabbath was kept holy and not violated. He then called on God once again to remember the good that he had done and to show mercy and goodness to Nehemiah to spare him (cf. v14).

Verses 23,24

17. What other sins had some people committed (v23)? Where else have we read of this problem?
18. Describe the consequence this sin had (v24). What danger of intermarriage does this demonstrate?

### *Intermarriage with people of the land*

Vv 1-3 had discussed failure of the Jews to separate themselves from the Ammonites and Moabites. Now Nehemiah begins to discuss a related problem in which the people were intermarrying with people of the land, Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Not only were they allowing them into the assembly, they were actually marrying them.

The people had a similar problem just 25 or so years earlier. As soon as Ezra had brought his group back from captivity, he discovered much intermarriage between Jews and people of the surrounding nations. He had led them to give up their wives on that occasion. See notes on Ezra 9 and 10 regarding this problem and the Scriptures it violated. (However, remember that Ruth was a Moabitess, whom God allowed to marry Boaz and even included her in Jesus' ancestry. There must have been some exception, such as genuine conversion as a proselyte.)

As a result of this intermarriage, half the children could not speak the Jew's language (presumably did not speak it clearly or well), but spoke the language of the foreign parent. This illustrates one of the more tragic problem areas caused by such intermarriages: the effects on the children. Not only did intermarriage endanger the servant of God to become unfaithful, but it subjected the children to ungodly influences that may cause them to be lost.

Children will be influenced by both parents, as illustrated here by the speech of these children. But godly parents should raise their children to serve the true God (Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4). The harmful spiritual influence of the ungodly parent is reason enough to avoid such marriage. Even if the servant of God remains faithful and does not fall away, chances are very slim that all the children will grow up to be faithful. Almost invariably one or more is lost. It is bad enough that parents choose to endanger their own souls, but their children have no choice who their parents will be. Intermarriage causes the children to be born into an influence that puts their souls at eternal risk without their choice or knowledge in the matter.

This example also shows the influence of people on others and the danger of compromising with sin in general. Just as these foreign parents influenced their children, so we are often influenced by people even if they are not our parents or family members. We want to have our cake and eat it too. We want to try to serve God yet maintain close ties to sinners or tempting people, places, and activities. Such associations frequently lead Christians into sin. See Proverbs 4:23; 6:27; 13:20; 22:3; Matthew 5:8; 6:13; 18:8,9; Romans 13:14; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Genesis 39:7-12. If this can be true just of friendships, how much more so can ungodly spouse or parents influence people for harm? This is why God expressly forbade such marriages in the Old Testament and why they are foolish and dangerous still today.

Verses 25-28

19. What great king had committed this same sin? What was the consequence? Give **b/c/v**.
20. Who is named in v28 as being guilty of this sin? What sin did we earlier learn that Eliashib had committed?
21. What did Nehemiah do regarding this grandson of Eliashib?
22. Application: What should be done today when a member of the church is involved in an unscriptural marriage and will not repent?

### ***Nehemiah's opposition to intermarriage***

Again Nehemiah contended with the people for their sins. They were violating God's law (see on Ezra 9,10). But they were also violating the covenant vow they had made to God just a few years earlier in 10:29. They had then expressly vowed to God that they would not do this kind of thing.

So Nehemiah pronounced curses upon them, beat some of them, and plucked out their hair (all of these were valid punishments under the Old Testament law). Then he made them once again take a vow (as in their former covenant) not to allow intermarriage with people of the land.

He also reminded the people of past examples of those who committed this error. Specifically, Solomon, though he had been highly blessed of God as king of Israel and the son of godly David, yet he was led into sin by his foreign wives (cf. 1 Kings 11:1ff). They had influenced him to commit all kinds of idolatry. Surely people in Nehemiah's day and likewise today are foolish to think they can avoid the temptation that even the wise man Solomon succumbed to. If we marry people who do not serve God, what makes us think we will not go astray like he did? Nehemiah then asked the people why they were transgressing God's law by marrying such people.

Next a specific instance is given. We are told that a son of Joiada, who was in turn a son of Eliashib the high priest, had married the daughter of Sanballat, who was a Horonite! Sanballat, of course, was another of the enemies who had attempted to stop Nehemiah and the people from rebuilding the wall, even threatening violence against them (see notes regarding Tobiah on vv 4-8 above). Not only was the high priest Eliashib himself allied with the enemy Tobiah, but Eliashib's grandson was married to a daughter of the enemy Sanballat. This was an express violation of God's law against intermarrying foreign wives and an express violation of the covenant of the people in chap. 10.

This example shows the powerful influence that can be caused by fraternizing with the enemy. When God's people form close associations with people in sin, the result harms other people of God. And the problem is magnified when those who are guilty are leaders. In this case, both the alliance with Tobiah and the alliance with Sanballat led the high priest and his family into sin.

Nehemiah dealt with this by chasing Sanballat's son-in-law from his presence. This clearly implies that he was removed from among the people of God, which was the proper discipline for people who committed such sin but would not repent. This passage does not mention that those who intermarried had to give up those wives, but this example shows that those who did not do so were driven from among the people. This also shows that people today who live in unscriptural remarriages, which today are an express violation of God's law, should likewise be disciplined by withdrawal if they will not repent. Such discipline is needed both to motivate the sinner to repent and to remove the sinful influence from among God's people.

Verses 29-31

23. What other good deeds did Nehemiah do to restore the people to God's service?

### ***Nehemiah's concluding prayer***

Just as Nehemiah had called on God to remember his righteous deeds, so he here called on God to remember those who had sinned and defiled the priesthood and the covenant of priests

and Levites. Such intermarriage was a sin for any Israelite, but especially for a priest. God, of course, will remember both good and bad of all that we do.

He then summarizes that he had cleansed them of everything pagan or heathen. This appears to especially refer to the priests and Levites. Note that all pagan religious practices and influences must be removed from the worship God's people offer to God. He then appointed the purified priests and Levites to their duties and services. He also appointed the responsibilities to provide for their support by offerings and firstfruits.

All these works Nehemiah had done according to God's will. He then concludes by once again calling on God to remember him and bless him for good (cf. vv 14,22). Surely Nehemiah was a good and godly leader. We can learn many lessons from him about useful service to God and helping God's people serve Him. Let us study diligently such godly men, learn the lessons, and apply them in our own lives that God can also remember us for good.`

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