

## NEHEMIAH

### **How to Navigate this eBook:**

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### **Title and Date of the Book:**

The Talmud, the Massoretic Text, as well as the Septuagint treat the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as one book. In the Hebrew Bible both books are connected to the books of First and Second Chronicles. Conservative scholars put the date of the books in the second half of the fifth century BC.

### **The Name and Position:**

The name Nehemiah is the transliteration of the Hebrew *nechemyah*, which means: "comforted of Yah." He is identified in the book as the "son of Hacaliah." Some scholars have concluded from the list of priests, recorded in ch. 10:1-8, that Nehemiah was a priest. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: "This view is supported by the Syriac and Arabic versions of 10:1, which read: 'Nehemiah the elder, the son of Hananiah the chief of the priests'; and by the Latin Vulgate (Jerome's Latin Bible, 390-405 A.D.) of 2 Macc 1:21, where he is called 'Nehemiah the priest,' and possibly by 2 Macc 1:18, where it is said that Nehemiah 'offered sacrifices, after that he had builded the temple and the altar.' "

In the last verse of the first chapter, Nehemiah states: "I was cupbearer to the king." This king was Artaxerxes, who is also known as "Longimanus," who ruled over Persia from 464 to 424 BC.

### **Outline of Nehemiah:**

*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* gives the following simple outline of the book:

- I. Restoration of the walls (1-7)
  - A. The initial circumstances (1-2)
  - B. The actual construction (3-6)
  - C. The later census (7)
- II. Reformation of the faith (8-13)
  - A. The Covenant renewed (8-10)
  - B. The nation revived (11:1-13:13)
  - C. The violations remedied (13:14-31)

### **The Text:**

#### **Chapter 1:1-3**

*1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:*

*In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa,  
2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.*

***3 They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."***

Nehemiah was not among the group of captives, listed in the first two chapters of the Book of Ezra, who had returned to Jerusalem, approximately 90 years earlier. Although he was born and raised in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, his heart was in Jerusalem and, unlike most of his fellowmen who had not returned, he had a vision for the city and what it stood for. Like Daniel, his “windows opened toward Jerusalem.”<sup>1</sup> His position as the king’s cupbearer may have prevented him from returning to the land of his fathers, but this did not diminish his burden.

Nehemiah’s attitude provides an important lesson for all God’s children. A person who has an important position can easily come to the conclusion that he has arrived in this world. Jesus said: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah is an example of a man who has a missionary vision. There are some people who do not want to become a missionary because their heart is at home; there are others who are unable to go out but their heart goes. An effective home front consists of people who want to go but are forced to stay.

We see how Nehemiah drinks in the reports of the mission field: “I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.” Nehemiah’s twofold emotional involvement with the Jewish remnant and the condition of the city forms the essence of a complete missionary vision. The condition of the Jewish remnant was that they had been set free but the question was whether they demonstrated their freedom in the way they lived. The city of Jerusalem was more than the capital of the Jewish state; it was the seat of God’s revelation in this world. Nehemiah wanted to know if there was a walled city and whether the remnant had a clear sense of the presence of the Lord. He wanted to know if there was anything more than the basic foundation, and whether those who lived there could be the prey of every one who wanted to attack. Those are questions Christians at home must ask themselves about the rest of the world.

#### **Chapter 1:4-11**

***4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.***

***5 Then I said: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands,***

***6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you.***

***7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.***

***8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations,***

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<sup>1</sup> See Daniel 6:11

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 6:21

*9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'*

*10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.*

*11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.*

Nehemiah was deeply moved by the account about the terrible condition of Jerusalem and the state of the population. He decided that something must be done about it. His approach is an example of a healthy way of tackling any problem. He begins at the root of the evil. The reason for the captivity had been the people's sin before God. Restoration, therefore, must begin with a confession of those sins. How serious Nehemiah was about this matter is obvious from his fasting (vs. 4) and his praying "day and night" (vs. 6). He also identified himself with the sins of the people as Daniel had done in his prayer for the nation, years earlier.<sup>3</sup>

Nehemiah's prayer is based upon the Word of God. Moses had predicted the captivity.<sup>4</sup> He had also foretold the return and restoration.<sup>5</sup> His prayer, therefore, is according to the will of God. He expresses the desire to be used by God (vs. 11<sup>b</sup>).

### **Chapter 2:1-10**

*1 In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before;*

*2 so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid,*

*3 but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"*

*4 The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven,*

*5 and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."*

*6 Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.*

*7 I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah?"*

*8 And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.*

<sup>3</sup> See Dan. 9:4-19

<sup>4</sup> See Lev. 26:27-39

<sup>5</sup> Lev. 26:40-45

***9 So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.***

***10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.***

Although Nehemiah had prayed that God would open a door to speak to the king, at the moment his prayer is answered, he is taken by complete surprise. He had prayed in the month of Kislev but the answer only came approximately four months later, in the month of Nisan. The circumstances in which Nehemiah had to serve the king, the strict protocol of royal wine drinking at the Persian court, did not leave him much time for spiritual contemplation. But the short silent prayer he flashed up to heaven was answered instantaneously. Some commentators believe that the queen who was sitting next to the king was Queen Esther. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, for instance, states: “Since the Persian monarchs did not admit their wives to be present at their state festivals, this must have been a private occasion. The queen referred to was probably Esther, whose presence would tend greatly to embolden Nehemiah in stating his request; and through her influence, powerfully exerted, it may be supposed, also by her sympathy with the patriotic design, his petition was granted, to go as deputy-governor of Judea, accompanied by a military guard, and invested with full powers to obtain materials for the building in Jerusalem, as well as to get all requisite aid in promoting his enterprise.” Others are just as adamant that it cannot have been Esther but a certain Damaspia. *The Pulpit Commentary* also observes that the queen’s presence was: “not an unusual circumstance. Though, when the monarch entertained guests, the queen remained in her private apartments, yet on other occasions she frequently took her meals with him.”

Once Nehemiah recovers his pose, he presents his request without hesitation in words, which he may have carefully rehearsed beforehand.

The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was, of course, God’s idea, not Nehemiah’s. When Nehemiah felt burdened, carrying the weight of the destruction of the city, he does nothing but experiencing how God felt about Jerusalem. His heartache was a weak reflection of God’s heartache that was fully demonstrated in Jesus’ suffering at the cross. Nehemiah is the Old Testament image of someone who suffered like the apostle Paul, who wrote to the Colossians: “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”<sup>6</sup>

God had placed Nehemiah in the position of being the king’s cupbearer in the same way as He had made Esther queen, “for such a time as this.”<sup>7</sup> And God is also able to gain the victory over the hearts of cupbearers and queens. The rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls came about because Nehemiah was an instrument in God’s hand, not because he was a pious patriot.

## **Chapter 2:11-20**

***11 I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days***

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<sup>6</sup> Col. 1:24

<sup>7</sup> See Esther 4:14<sup>b</sup>

*12 I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.*

*13 By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.*

*14 Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through;*

*15 so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate.*

*16 The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.*

*17 Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."*

*18 I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.*

*19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"*

*20 I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."*

Nehemiah had not told anyone what God had put in his heart to do for Jerusalem. It is good to have secrets with God. Some of the marvel of fellowship with God can be lost in too much talking about it with others. It is not only because God dislikes publicity, but it may also be good strategy to keep silent. There are always people like Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite who are set against the renewing and life-giving influence of God's Spirit. Some people feel quite comfortable at Jerusalem's piles of rubble and they put up a powerful resistance against anything that would disturb their comfort. Nehemiah's vision opposed that which had become a tradition. He demonstrates that a genuine vision consists in carrying inwardly the burden God feels; it is an inner motivating power, not necessarily an outward display.

We also note the intelligent way Nehemiah approaches the situation. He investigates secretly and makes all the necessary preparations in secret, so that when the time comes, the work can be started without delay. Some mission posts had to be open that way; the missionary had to trek in with the intent to remain. We had experiences in our mission work, where someone of our society would make a reconnaissance trip to a valley before determining whether to establish a mission post, only to find a group that opposed our work firmly established once we decided to begin working in the area. Nehemiah demonstrates that he knows his enemies. Knowing the enemy is half of the victory.

In the same way we can say that Nehemiah's vision was born out of God's burden for Jerusalem, so we can say that Sanballat and Tobiah's resistance were inspired by the

devil. Their arguments are the same as those used so successfully before by those who wanted to stop the rebuilding of the temple.<sup>8</sup> They were, of course, correct in stating that the old Jerusalem had been a hotbed of rebellion. That previous condition, however, was not born from the same vision as that of Nehemiah. God's real children often share in the ignominy of those who are only Christians in name. Nehemiah's sole defense was that, this time, God would help the rebuilding to succeed, and will not allow, as previously, the work to be stopped.<sup>9</sup> It could be that Sanballat and Tobiah initially offered their cooperation, as the Jews' enemies had done before.<sup>10</sup> That may be the reason for Nehemiah's reply to them: "You have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

Those who have a share in and an historic claim to Jerusalem can only do God's work in this world. God's children are those who are "born in Jerusalem"; they have a claim. Psalms Eighty-Seven states: "I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me--Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush--and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.' " And: "As they make music they will sing," "All my fountains are in you." <sup>11</sup> It is easier to build a city than to have fellowship with God. Many cities are built as a substitute for this fellowship.

### **Chapter 3:1-32**

***1 Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel.***

***2 The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them.***

***3 The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place.***

***4 Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired the next section. Next to him Meshullam son of Berekiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs, and next to him Zadok son of Baana also made repairs.***

***5 The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.***

***6 The Jeshanah Gate was repaired by Joiada son of Paseah and Meshullam son of Besodeiah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place.***

***7 Next to them, repairs were made by men from Gibeon and Mizpah-Melatiah of Gibeon and Jadon of Meronoth--places under the authority of the governor of Trans-Euphrates.***

***8 Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the next section; and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers, made repairs next to that. They restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall.***

***9 Rephaiah son of Hur, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section.***

***10 Adjoining this, Jedaiah son of Harumaph made repairs opposite his house, and Hattush son of Hashabneiah made repairs next to him.***

<sup>8</sup> See Ezra 4:12-16

<sup>9</sup> See Ezra 4:23,24

<sup>10</sup> See Ezra 4:1,2

<sup>11</sup> Ps. 87:4,7

*11 Malkijah son of Harim and Hasshub son of Pahath-Moab repaired another section and the Tower of the Ovens.*

*12 Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.*

*13 The Valley Gate was repaired by Hanun and the residents of Zanoah. They rebuilt it and put its doors and bolts and bars in place. They also repaired five hundred yards of the wall as far as the Dung Gate.*

*14 The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah son of Recab, ruler of the district of Beth Hakkerem. He rebuilt it and put its doors and bolts and bars in place.*

*15 The Fountain Gate was repaired by Shallun son of Col-Hozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah. He rebuilt it, roofing it over and putting its doors and bolts and bars in place. He also repaired the wall of the Pool of Siloam, by the King's Garden, as far as the steps going down from the City of David.*

*16 Beyond him, Nehemiah son of Azbuk, ruler of a half-district of Beth Zur, made repairs up to a point opposite the tombs of David, as far as the artificial pool and the House of the Heroes.*

*17 Next to him, the repairs were made by the Levites under Rehum son of Bani. Beside him, Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, carried out repairs for his district.*

*18 Next to him, the repairs were made by their countrymen under Binnui son of Henadad, ruler of the other half-district of Keilah.*

*19 Next to him, Ezer son of Jeshua, ruler of Mizpah, repaired another section, from a point facing the ascent to the armory as far as the angle.*

*20 Next to him, Baruch son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the angle to the entrance of the house of Eliashib the high priest.*

*21 Next to him, Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired another section, from the entrance of Eliashib's house to the end of it.*

*22 The repairs next to him were made by the priests from the surrounding region.*

*23 Beyond them, Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs in front of their house; and next to them, Azariah son of Maaseiah, the son of Ananiah, made repairs beside his house.*

*24 Next to him, Binnui son of Henadad repaired another section, from Azariah's house to the angle and the corner,*

*25 and Palal son of Uzai worked opposite the angle and the tower projecting from the upper palace near the court of the guard. Next to him, Pedaiah son of Parosh*

*26 and the temple servants living on the hill of Ophel made repairs up to a point opposite the Water Gate toward the east and the projecting tower.*

*27 Next to them, the men of Tekoa repaired another section, from the great projecting tower to the wall of Ophel.*

*28 Above the Horse Gate, the priests made repairs, each in front of his own house.*

*29 Next to them, Zadok son of Immer made repairs opposite his house. Next to him, Shemaiah son of Shecaniah, the guard at the East Gate, made repairs.*

*30 Next to him, Hananiah son of Shelemiah, and Hanun, the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another section. Next to them, Meshullam son of Berekiah made repairs opposite his living quarters.*

***31 Next to him, Malkijah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs as far as the house of the temple servants and the merchants, opposite the Inspection Gate, and as far as the room above the corner;***

***32 and between the room above the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and merchants made repairs.***

This chapter gives a list of names of people who rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem, with the records of the sections for which they were responsible.

The work begins and ends at the Sheep Gate. This is the gate through which the sheep were brought to the temple for the sacrifices. As in Ezra the rebuilding of the temple begins with the building of an altar,<sup>12</sup> so here also the altar is the main focus in the building of the wall. Without sacrifice there can be no fellowship with God and without fellowship with God the building of the wall would have no significance. There is also a deeper meaning in the fact that the priests are mentioned as the first builders. They are the link between God and men. Without a sacrifice and without a person who brings the sacrifice, the world is cut off from fellowship with God. The key to the secret of the rebuilding of the wall is found in the fact that the right person was at the right place. We may see in this an image of prayer that supports all building that is done on God's wall. The right functioning of a praying home front is necessary for the building of the Kingdom of God on the mission field.

There is a real blessing in the study of the people of are building this wall. There are some who profit directly from the restoration, like Benjamin and Hasshub who work on the section in front of their own houses (vs.23). There are also people from other cities who do not profit directly, like the people from Jericho (vs. 2). Then there is the work of the goldsmiths and the perfume makers (vs. 8), as well as the participation of the girls (vs.12). All this proves that there had been a revival in the hearts of the people. There is also mention, however, of some arrogant people who considered themselves too high to dirty their hands. We read about some men from Tekoa: "their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors" (vs. 5). These nobles considered themselves better than Nehemiah who had the king's confidence.

#### **Chapter 4:1-23**

***1 When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews,***

***2 and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble-burned as they are?"***

***3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building-if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"***

***4 Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity.***

***5 Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.***

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<sup>12</sup> See Ezra 3:1-4



*6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.*

*7 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry.*

*8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.*

*9 But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.*

*10 Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."*

*11 Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."*

*12 Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."*

*13 Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows.*

*14 After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."*

*15 When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work.*

*16 From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah*

*17 who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other,*

*18 and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.*

*19 Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall.*

*20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"*

*21 So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out.*

*22 At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day."*

*23 Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.*

This is one of the most impressive sections of this book. Initially, Sanballat and Tobiah confined themselves to mockery with an underlying current of deep irritation (verses 1-3). Nehemiah took this ridicule to where it belonged: to God. We should never take derision too lightly or too heavily. A child of God who does God's work, according to His will, deserves honor, not ridicule. The purpose of the enemy is to undermine our sense of human dignity. This should never be taken lightly. But if we take it too

seriously, and if we allow our conduct to be influenced by unfriendly criticism, we become servants of men instead of servants of God.

Sanballat and Tobiah's attitude has the opposite effect than it intended to have; their pinpricks work rather as stimuli. Nehemiah states that "the people worked with all their heart." The NKJV reads: "The people had a mind to work." There is in human beings a built-in mechanism that resists opposition and persecution, to the point that "the blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the church."

As the rebuilding of the wall progresses, the irritation of the enemies grows into a deadly hatred. The word "deadly" must be taken literally. Vs. 11 reads: "Also our enemies said, 'Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.' " If it is true, what we supposed earlier, that Sanballat and Tobiah had initially offered their cooperation, it now becomes evident that their willingness to help was demonically inspired. These people were children of the devil. They belonged to the same category as the Jews to whom Jesus would say later: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."<sup>13</sup>

The inhabitants of Jerusalem took various measures against this conspiracy. The first one was prayer (vs. 9), followed by the posting of guards. We interpret vs. 10, which reads: "Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, 'The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall,' " to mean that the people of Judah disseminated false information for the purpose of making the enemy believe that Jerusalem would be totally unprepared for their attack.

Next, the builders of Jerusalem prepared themselves for a complete defense of the city. The fact that the attack never materialized does not mean that the alarm had been false. It also does not diminish the tension under which these people must have labored, nor did it lessen their faith in God. The absence of war must be seen as proof of God's intervention, which is as miraculous as if God had given an overwhelming victory to an outnumbered army. Nehemiah notes: "When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work." Many wars are fought because one of the parties had sunken into a deep and uncaring sleep. The absence of war in this case was, undoubtedly, due to the fact that the people of Jerusalem were prepared. Knowing who the enemy is and being prepared to face him is often half of the victory, and sometimes even more!

The attitude of Nehemiah and his men is a live-illustration of what Paul calls: "be[ing] able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand."<sup>14</sup> Half of Nehemiah's people did the work and the other half took care of the defense. The ones who carried the building material carried their loads with one hand while holding their weapons in the other and the actual builders of the wall carried their swords strapped to their side. The man, who had to sound the trumpet and give the alarm in case of an attack, was continuously at Nehemiah's side. These people were not only alert, they were prepared for all events. Many of us stumble because we are not ready to fight against everything, however unexpected, and to accept our position as part of the struggle in which the Lord has placed us.

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<sup>13</sup> John 8:44

<sup>14</sup> Eph. 6:13

**Chapter 5:1-13**

*1 Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers.*

*2 Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."*

*3 Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."*

*4 Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards."*

*5 Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."*

*6 When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry.*

*7 I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them*

*8 and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.*

*9 So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?"*

*10 I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop!*

*11 Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them-the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil."*

*12 "We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."*

*Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised.*

*13 I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!" At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.*

This section is a vivid example of human egoism that wants to profit and enrich itself from the destitution of others. Those who were guilty were the ones who had themselves returned from captivity. Some may have been from among those who had been bought back from slavery to heathen masters, who are mentioned in vs.8. Jesus teaches us to pray: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."<sup>15</sup> This admonition does not only pertain to bad feelings toward others but also to material debts. Jesus illustrates this in the "Parable of the Forgiven Slave."<sup>16</sup> Some of the Jews in

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<sup>15</sup> Matt. 6:12

<sup>16</sup> See Matt. 18:23-35

Nehemiah's day experienced hunger while others had more than enough to eat. Others had to put themselves in debt to the point of having to sell their own children into slavery.

Nehemiah reacted with anger but this does not mean that he was impulsive in the measures he took. When he heard the charges, we read: "I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials." His accusations were so convincing because they were based upon the Word of God. We read in Deuteronomy: "Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess."<sup>17</sup> His charge was also irrefutable because he had given the example himself. His confrontation had effect, because the nobles and officials pledged under oath to return what had been given as collateral and to repay the interests taken.

### **Chapter 5:14-19**

*14 Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year-twelve years-neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor.*

*15 But the earlier governors-those preceding me-placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that.*

*16 Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.*

*17 Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations.*

*18 Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.*

*19 Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.*

Nehemiah had the right to be paid from the tax money the people paid into the Persian treasure, but instead, he determined to live by faith. He was unwilling to levy taxes from his impoverished fellowmen, because, as he stated: "out of reverence for God I did not act like that." The people remembered the usury of Nehemiah's predecessors. If Nehemiah had continued that trend, he would have given a poor testimony. From a human viewpoint, what Nehemiah did was an impossibility. He did not only need money for his own support but also for his entertaining of his staff of 150 men. Yet, the list of vs. 18 indicates that food was not being economized. It seems impossible that Nehemiah could pay for all this out of his own pocket. But since he had put his trust in God for his own livelihood and that of his people, God did not put him to shame.

### **Chapter 6:1-19**

*1 When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it-though up to that time I had not*

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<sup>17</sup> Deut. 23:19,20

*set the doors in the gates- 2 Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono."*

*But they were scheming to harm me;*

*3 so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"*

*4 Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.*

*5 Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter*

*6 in which was written: "It is reported among the nations-and Geshem says it is true-that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king*

*7 and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: `There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together."*

*8 I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head."*

*9 They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed." [But I prayed,] "Now strengthen my hands."*

*10 One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you-by night they are coming to kill you."*

*11 But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!"*

*12 I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.*

*13 He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.*

*14 Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.*

*15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.*

*16 When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.*

*17 Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them.*

*18 For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah.*

*19 Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.*

The work is now almost finished. Only the doors of the gates still must be hung in place. At this point the opposition rises to its peak. Four times, Nehemiah is invited to

participate in a “conference.” He understands, however, that there is evil intent behind this and he refuses with the famous words: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down.” Every one of God’s projects is a great project and everything that is intended to keep us from working on it should be regarded as the devil’s efforts to make the work stop.

In the fifth “invitation” Nehemiah is accused of rebelling against the king. The implication is that Sanballat would want to come to a political arrangement with Nehemiah on this point. The rather transparent plot is, of course, that if Nehemiah agreed to come, he would acknowledge the truth of the accusation, which could be used as proof against him.

The whole purpose of the Evil One is always to keep us from doing the Lord’s work. Satan has never any objection to a well-oiled and smooth-running organization or against an orthodox theology, as long as the walls of the Kingdom will not be built. Our prayer, therefore, must always be: “Now strengthen my hands.”

The most unscrupulous attack was launched against Nehemiah at the point of his greatest susceptibility. Shemaiah gave to Nehemiah what was supposed to be a prophecy from the Lord, advising him to hide inside the temple (probably in the Holy of Holies), a place where neither Nehemiah nor his enemies would be allowed to enter. This was supposed to protect him from a plot to assassinate him. The fact that Nehemiah unmasked the ruse is proof of his intimate fellowship with the Lord. From a human standpoint, he would also have made himself ridiculous as leader of the people, and would have lost a great deal of his influence.

The last verses of this chapter demonstrate how ridiculous bureaucracy with its writing of letters can be. How ludicrous this human activity, this scurrying back and forth becomes when confronted with the powerful working of the Spirit of God.

### **Chapter 7:1-73**

*1 After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed.*

*2 I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do.*

*3 I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses."*

*4 Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt.*

*5 So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return. This is what I found written there:*

*6 These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town,*

*7 in company with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshana, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum and Baanah): The list of the men of Israel:*

- 8 the descendants of Parosh 2,172*  
*9 of Shephatiah 372*  
*10 of Arah 652*  
*11 of Pahath-Moab 2,818 (through the line of Jeshua and Joab)*  
*12 of Elam 1,254*  
*13 of Zattu 845*  
*14 of Zaccai 760*  
*15 of Binnui 648*  
*16 of Bebai 628*  
*17 of Azgad 2,322*  
*18 of Adonikam 667*  
*19 of Bigvai 2,067*  
*20 of Adin 655*  
*21 of Ater (through Hezekiah) 98*  
*22 of Hashum 328*  
*23 of Bezai 324*  
*24 of Hariph 112*  
*25 of Gibeon 95*  
*26 the men of Bethlehem and Netophah 188*  
*27 of Anathoth 128*  
*28 of Beth Azmaveth 42*  
*29 of Kiriath Jearim, Kephirah and Beeroth 743*  
*30 of Ramah and Geba 621*  
*31 of Micmash 122*  
*32 of Bethel and Ai 123*  
*33 of the other Nebo 52*  
*34 of the other Elam 1,254*  
*35 of Harim 320*  
*36 of Jericho 345*  
*37 of Lod, Hadid and Ono 721*  
*38 of Senaah 3,930*  
*39 The priests: the descendants of Jedaiah (through the family of Jeshua) 973*  
*40 of Immer 1,052*  
*41 of Pashhur 1,247*  
*42 of Harim 1,017*  
*43 The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua 74 (through Kadmiel through the line of Hodaviah)*  
*44 The singers: the descendants of Asaph 148*  
*45 The gatekeepers: the descendants of Shallum, Ater, Talmon, Akkub, Hatita and Shobai 138*  
*46 The temple servants: the descendants of Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth,*  
*47 Keros, Sia, Padon,*  
*48 Lebana, Hagaba, Shalmal,*

49 Hanan, Giddel, Gahar,  
 50 Reaiah, Rezin, Nekoda,  
 51 Gazzam, Uzza, Paseah,  
 52 Besai, Meunim, Nephussim,  
 53 Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur,  
 54 Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha,  
 55 Barkos, Sisera, Temah,  
 56 Neziah and Hatipha  
 57 *The descendants of the servants of Solomon: the descendants of Sotai, Sophereth, Perida,*  
 58 Jaala, Darkon, Giddel, 59 Shephatiah, Hattil, Pokereth-Hazzebaim and Amon  
 60 *The temple servants and the descendants of the servants of Solomon* 392  
 61 *The following came up from the towns of Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Kerub, Addon and Immer, but they could not show that their families were descended from Israel:*  
 62 *the descendants of Delaiah, Tobiah and Nekoda* 642  
 63 *And from among the priests: the descendants of Hobaiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai (a man who had married a daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by that name).*  
 64 *These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean.* 65 *The governor, therefore, ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there should be a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim.*  
 66 *The whole company numbered 42,360,*  
 67 *besides their 7,337 menservants and maidservants; and they also had 245 men and women singers.* 68 *There were 736 horses, 245 mules,*  
 69 *435 camels and 6,720 donkeys.*  
 70 *Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 drachmas of gold, 50 bowls and 530 garments for priests.*  
 71 *Some of the heads of the families gave to the treasury for the work 20,000 drachmas of gold and 2,200 minas of silver.*  
 72 *The total given by the rest of the people was 20,000 drachmas of gold, 2,000 minas of silver and 67 garments for priests.*  
 73 *The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers and the temple servants, along with certain of the people and the rest of the Israelites, settled in their own towns. When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns,*

When the wall is finished, the most important goal is achieved but the actual labor only begins. We are again reminded of Paul's words in Ephesians: "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and *after you have done everything, to stand.*"<sup>18</sup> Building the wall was nothing but a preparation necessary for living a normal everyday life. The fact that the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites play such an important part is an indication that watchfulness, gratitude, and service are important facets in daily living.

Jerusalem is more than a walled-in city, the capital of the country. In Nehemiah's day it was the place where God had revealed Himself on earth and where He had

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<sup>18</sup> Eph. 6:13



promised to reveal Himself again. Nehemiah must have been familiar with Isaiah's words: "I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth."<sup>19</sup> In our day also, God is looking for reliable and God-fearing people whom He can post as watchmen, in whose heart is the desire to see Jerusalem become "the praise of the earth."

Jerusalem was not merely rebuilt to provide a safe haven for the returning Jews but to be a monument of God's glory. For this reason every watchman must be a singer, one whose gratitude and praise rise to heaven like a hymn. The Levites were committed to a life of service. This three-fold status was not reserved for only a few chosen ones; it was to be the position of every inhabitant of the city. Everyone in Jerusalem had to be a watchman at his own house, at the place of his habitation.

The remainder of this chapter, with the exception of verses 4 and 5, is a repetition of the list of repatriates of about 13 years earlier, found in the Book of Ezra chapter two.

### **Chapter 8:1-18**

*1 [When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns,] all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.*

*2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.*

*3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.*

*4 Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.*

*5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up.*

*6 Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*

*7 The Levites-Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah-instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.*

*8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.*

*9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.*

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<sup>19</sup> Isa. 62:6,7

*10 Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*

*11 The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."*

*12 Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.*

*13 On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law.*

*14 They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month*

*15 and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths"-as it is written.*

*16 So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim.*

*17 The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.*

*18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.*

The reading of the law on that day must have been a very impressive event. It makes us realize how privileged we are to have access to the Word of God on a daily basis and not to be dependant upon the reading of it only at some special occasion. The hunger for God's Word must have been great among the Israelites. They gathered as one man to listen to the reading. And they patiently listened from early morning to late afternoon. This great spiritual hunger created a perfect climate for a genuine spiritual revival. A lack of spiritual hunger is always the root of all deadness and monotonous drudgery. After having rebuilt the temple and repaired the wall, the Israelites had finally arrived at that which is the core of the matter. They evinced a sincere desire to hear the will of God and to obey it.

One of the great difficulties during this celebration was that the law was written in Hebrew and most of the people who had returned from captivity no longer understood the old language. They were separated from the exodus from Egypt by several centuries. The message of the Pentateuch was no longer up-to-date for them. An archaic Bible and a formalistic, ritualistic religious practice provide a good cover for a life that lacks fellowship with God. But whenever there is hunger for fellowship with the living God, the Bible is always translated into a language modern man understands. This was the reason Ezra took such pains to clearly read the message and to explain the Hebrew text in

Aramaic (vs.8). This clear message does not fail to have its effect upon the hearers. It becomes clear that, here also, “through the law we become conscious of sin” (vs. 10<sup>b</sup>).<sup>20</sup>

Nehemiah and Ezra’s exhortation to the people to celebrate was not an effort to blind the people to the issue of their sin, as if God would wink at their transgressions. There is, however, a point where conviction of sin can become a weapon in Satan’s hands. If sorrow over sin turns into an unbelieving wailing that muddies the vision of atonement, it is time to step out of the vicious circle and to stand on the basis of the victory God has given. God has turned His wrath away from us and our sins are covered by Jesus’ blood. Joy is proof of a believing acceptance of God’s grace. “The joy of the LORD is your strength!” The Hebrew word *ma`owz* means: “a fortified place,” “a defense.” It is our protection against the attacks of the Evil One.

When the people go and celebrate it is not only because they are told to do so, but because they understand the reason. A clear insight in the meaning of God’s forgiveness of sins cannot but generate in us an overwhelming sense of joy. “The people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food.”

The same Feast of Tabernacles had also been celebrated after the construction of the altar;<sup>21</sup> now it is celebrated after the completion of the wall. The Feast of Tabernacles was the feast of the winepress and the threshing floor. It was the last feast that was celebrated after the harvest was hauled in. This was the feast during which Jesus proclaimed: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”<sup>22</sup> The feast symbolizes the joy of being filled with the Holy Spirit. The feast had not been celebrated with such demonstrations of joy since the days of Joshua.

### **Chapter 9:1-38**

***1 On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads.***

***2 Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.***

***3 They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God.***

***4 Standing on the stairs were the Levites-Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Kenani-who called with loud voices to the LORD their God.***

***5 And the Levites-Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah-said: "Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting." "Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise.***

***6 You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.***

***7 "You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham.***

<sup>20</sup> Rom. 3:20

<sup>21</sup> See Ezra 3:4

<sup>22</sup> John 7:37,38

*8 You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.*

*9 "You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea.*

*10 You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day.*

*11 You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters.*

*12 By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.*

*13 "You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good.*

*14 You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses.*

*15 In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.*

*16 "But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands.*

*17 They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them,*

*18 even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.*

*19 "Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take.*

*20 You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst.*

*21 For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.*

*22 "You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan.*

*23 You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess.*

*24 Their sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased.*

*25 They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.*

26 *"But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies.*

27 *So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.*

28 *"But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.*

29 *"You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen.*

30 *For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples.*

31 *But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.*

32 *"Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today.*

33 *In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong.*

34 *Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them.*

35 *Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.*

36 *"But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces.*

37 *Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.*

38 *"In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."*

A superficial glance at this chapter will make us believe that the distress and fasting of this chapter contradicts the joy and celebration of the previous chapter. We find that this is not merely a matter of chronology, such as Solomon states in Ecclesiastes: "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven."<sup>23</sup> There is a fundamental difference between placing ourselves on the basis God wants us to occupy and the application of God's standard to our daily life. There is a sadness over sins, a

<sup>23</sup> Eccl. 3:1

sense of defeat, that is the result of unwillingness to take our stand on the foundation of God's grace because of the blood of the Lamb. That is the kind of sadness that robs us of our spiritual strength. This is, obviously, not sadness according to the will of God. As soon as we have climbed the rock of forgiveness, God holds us no longer responsible for sins committed in unbelief and ignorance. There is, however, also a sorrow according to God's will, which is the result of our discovery that, after having received forgiveness, our way of life and God's standard are incongruent. Paul writes about this: "Now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us."<sup>24</sup> Sanctification is a road of tears and pain. If we compare ourselves with the Word of God and we confess that which sticks out or doesn't measure up, the Lord will bring us to the place where "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."<sup>25</sup>

The reason for the confessions in this chapter is the fraternization of the Israelites with foreigners. The fact that this chapter is included in the Scriptures proves that the meaning of this goes well beyond a matter of mere nationalism. It deals with the foreign element that appears over and over again in the Bible. This element is personified in the characters of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. As we saw earlier, these people presented themselves initially as friends of the Jews, who pretended to want to serve the Lord. But once they were unmasked, they showed their real character. The nature of the tree determines the fruit. Those who are not born of God can never produce fruit that is acceptable to God. This does not mean that unregenerate people cannot be religious.

This chapter reveals how the foreign element succeeded in penetrating the core. Tobias, Sanballat and company personified the enemy on the outside, but the foreign women the Israelites had married brought inward rot into the life of the nation. Malachi prophesied about the same matter: "Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, 'Why?' It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. 'I hate divorce,' says the LORD God of Israel, 'and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,' says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith."<sup>26</sup> The enemy inside always constitutes a much greater threat than the enemy outside.

Identification with the sins of others with whom we are connected in one way or another is a biblical principle. Nehemiah states: "They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers." This indicates that confession does not always mean admission of sins committed personally, but also unwillingness to cover up of the acts of other people about whom we would naturally be inclined to comprise. There is a rather uncompromising facet in the confession: "I am the son of a murderer." In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reproaches the Pharisees: "You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our

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<sup>24</sup> II Cor. 7:9

<sup>25</sup> I John 3:2

<sup>26</sup> Mal. 2:13-16

forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets."<sup>27</sup> The Pharisees did not deny the sins of the fathers but they believed that they would have done better themselves. True confession of sin means a break with the spirit of sin. I may not be a slave merchant myself, as were my ancestors, but unless I dissociate myself from their sin with a positive testimony of love and compassion, I demonstrate that the same spirit that made them sin also lives in me.

Their confession begins with praise; God is not the one to be blamed. Justice is on His side. He is the only and ultimate measure of good and evil. These Israelites recognized Him as the eternal God before whom the most glorious creatures in heaven fall down in worship and adoration. A vision of God's omnipotence and glory forms a solid basis for His service on earth. The God we serve on earth is often too small. It is the knowledge of God's all surpassing majesty and glory that gives such dramatic tension to His intervention on earth and makes human disobedience into such pitiful mess up.

The whole history of Israel from the call of Abraham to conquest of Canaan is a picture book of God's plan of salvation for us in Christ Jesus. The church's failure to be a testimony of light in this world is much more serious than Israel's laxity in the occupation of Canaan. The sin that darkened the testimony of the ancestors of both Israel and us is the sin of unbelief, the refusal to enter into God's rest in His Son Jesus Christ. Many Christians lives as slaves, even though they be kings.

#### **Chapter 9:38 – 10:39**

**38** *"In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."*

**10:1** *Those who sealed it were: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah. Zedekiah,*

**2** *Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah,*

**3** *Pashhur, Amariah, Malkijah,*

**4** *Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch,*

**5** *Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah,*

**6** *Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch,*

**7** *Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin,*

**8** *Maaziah, Bilgai and Shemaiah. These were the priests.*

**9** *The Levites: Jeshua son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel,*

**10** *and their associates: Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan,*

**11** *Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah,*

**12** *Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah,*

**13** *Hodiah, Bani and Beninu.*

**14** *The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-Moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani,*

**15** *Bunni, Azgad, Bebai,*

**16** *Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin,*

**17** *Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur,*

**18** *Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai,*

**19** *Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai,*

**20** *Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir,*

**21** *Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua,*

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<sup>27</sup> Matt. 23:29-31

22 *Pelathiah, Hanan, Anaiiah,*

23 *Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub,*

24 *Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek,*

25 *Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah,*

26 *Ahiah, Hanan, Anan,*

27 *Malluch, Harim and Baanah.*

28 *"The rest of the people-priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand-*

29 *all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.*

30 *"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.*

31 *"When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.*

32 *"We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God:*

33 *for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, New Moon festivals and appointed feasts; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God.*

34 *"We-the priests, the Levites and the people-have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law.*

35 *"We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the LORD each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree.*

36 *"As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests ministering there.*

37 *"Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our [grain] offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work.*

38 *A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury.*

39 *The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and oil to the storerooms where the articles for the sanctuary are kept and where the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the singers stay. "We will not neglect the house of our God."*

These verses described the making of a covenant and the content of the agreement. It is good to enter into a covenant with God. It gives legitimacy to our service,



it cuts off our retreat, and it gives God a chance to demonstrate to us who He is. Our promises to God have little value if we do not understand the condition of our own heart and the potential frailty of our humanity. Joshua tried to make this clear to the people after they had entered Canaan. We read: “Joshua said to the people, ‘You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.’”<sup>28</sup> If we make impulsive promises to God without leaning on the power of the Holy Spirit to keep them, our promises are doomed to fail.

The leaders of the people, the Levites, and the priests put their covenant in writing and affixed their seal to it. God seals those who seal their promises to Him. Vs. 29 states the general intent of the covenant, the obligation to do the will of God. We read: “All these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.”

The stipulations that forbade marriage to foreigners and buying merchandise on the Sabbath and official holidays, find their spiritual counterpart in the New Testament and, as such, they are still relevant for us. To refuse to be mixed up with elements that are foreign to the nature of God, and pollute that which comes from God with that which wants to maintain itself independently from God provides a healthy protection of our own spirituality. To keep the ordinances of the Sabbath and the obligations of the Sabbath Year corresponds to our consciously entering into the rest of God.<sup>29</sup> As the hymn writer wrote: “Jesus, I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art.”

The spiritual attitude that prompted these men to make this covenant with God bore immediate practical fruit in the maintenance of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. The first important step was the decision to contribute one third of a shekel per year for the temple service. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “This was a revival of the Mosaic precept that every man over twenty years old had to pay one half shekel for the support of the Tabernacle (Ex 30:13; cf. Matt 17:24). Perhaps the poverty of the people at this time called for a slightly lowered tax rate.” The context, however, suggests that this was a voluntary love offering in addition to the required tithes. Next to this there was a voluntary contribution of firewood for the altar. The eminent practicality of it all strikes us. How different would the work of worldwide missions be if every Christian would ask: “What is needed, and how can I contribute?” The bringing of firewood did not involve the giving of personal property. The forest was there for everybody. What was needed was people who were willing to cut the trees and carry the wood. Everyone can contribute energy and time.

Added to this was the observation of payment of the required tithes. This involved more a recognition of God’s right of man’s property than a sacrifice of personal wealth. A person who tithes acknowledges that God is the owner of all. Tithes symbolize the all of property. A tithe was also given of these tithes that were collected. The person who is directly engaged in the Lord’s work ought to concede, more than anyone else, that everything he possesses belongs to the Lord.

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<sup>28</sup> Josh. 24:19,20

<sup>29</sup> See Heb. 4:10

**Chapter 11:1-36**

*1 Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. 2 The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.*

*3 These are the provincial leaders who settled in Jerusalem (now some Israelites, priests, Levites, temple servants and descendants of Solomon's servants lived in the towns of Judah, each on his own property in the various towns,*

*4 while other people from both Judah and Benjamin lived in Jerusalem): From the descendants of Judah: Athaiah son of Uzziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, a descendant of Perez;*

*5 and Maaseiah son of Baruch, the son of Col-Hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, a descendant of Shelah.*

*6 The descendants of Perez who lived in Jerusalem totaled 468 able men.*

*7 From the descendants of Benjamin: Sallu son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiiah,*

*8 and his followers, Gabbai and Sallai-928 men.*

*9 Joel son of Zicri was their chief officer, and Judah son of Hassenuah was over the Second District of the city.*

*10 From the priests: Jedaiah; the son of Joiarib; Jakin;*

*11 Seraiah son of Hilkiah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, supervisor in the house of God,*

*12 and their associates, who carried on work for the temple-822 men; Adaiah son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashhur, the son of Malkijah,*

*13 and his associates, who were heads of families-242 men; Amashsai son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer,*

*14 and his associates, who were able men-128. Their chief officer was Zabdiel son of Haggadolim.*

*15 From the Levites: Shemaiah son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni;*

*16 Shabbethai and Jozabad, two of the heads of the Levites, who had charge of the outside work of the house of God;*

*17 Mattaniah son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, the director who led in thanksgiving and prayer; Bakbukiah, second among his associates; and Abda son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun.*

*18 The Levites in the holy city totaled 284.*

*19 The gatekeepers: Akkub, Talmon and their associates, who kept watch at the gates-172 men.*

*20 The rest of the Israelites, with the priests and Levites, were in all the towns of Judah, each on his ancestral property.*

*21 The temple servants lived on the hill of Ophel, and Ziha and Gishpa were in charge of them.*

*22 The chief officer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Mica. Uzzi was one of Asaph's descendants, who were the singers responsible for the service of the house of God.*

*23 The singers were under the king's orders, which regulated their daily activity.*

*24 Pethahiah son of Meshezabel, one of the descendants of Zerah son of Judah, was the king's agent in all affairs relating to the people.*

*25 As for the villages with their fields, some of the people of Judah lived in Kiriath Arba and its surrounding settlements, in Dibon and its settlements, in Jekabzeel and its villages,*

*26 in Jeshua, in Moladah, in Beth Pelet,*

*27 in Hazar Shual, in Beersheba and its settlements,*

*28 in Ziklag, in Meconah and its settlements,*

*29 in En Rimmon, in Zorah, in Jarmuth,*

*30 Zanoah, Adullam and their villages, in Lachish and its fields, and in Azekah and its settlements. So they were living all the way from Beersheba to the Valley of Hinnom.*

*31 The descendants of the Benjamites from Geba lived in Micmash, Aija, Bethel and its settlements,*

*32 in Anathoth, Nob and Ananiah,*

*33 in Hazor, Ramah and Gittaim,*

*34 in Hadid, Zeboim and Neballat,*

*35 in Lod and Ono, and in the Valley of the Craftsmen.*

*36 Some of the divisions of the Levites of Judah settled in Benjamin.*

What is described in this chapter corresponds to what we read in chapter 7:4,5 – “Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families.” For the Jews, this meant the sacrifice of their heritage. Because we read in vs. 20: “The rest of the Israelites, with the priests and Levites, were in all the towns of Judah, each on his ancestral property.” This is the reason the people praised those who volunteered to bring this sacrifice. Sometimes it is necessary for the cause of the Kingdom that we sacrifice our own heritage. Jesus assures us that: “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”<sup>30</sup> It is important for us also that we decide to live where the Lord wants us to live.

### **Chapter 12:1-26**

*1 These were the priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and with Jeshua:*

*Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra,*

*2 Amariah, Malluch, Hattush,*

*3 Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth,*

*4 Iddo, Ginnethon, Abijah,*

*5 Mijamin, Moadiah, Bilgah,*

*6 Shemaiah, Joiarib, Jedaiah,*

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<sup>30</sup> Matt. 19:29

*7 Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah and Jedaiah. These were the leaders of the priests and their associates in the days of Jeshua.*

*8 The Levites were Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and also Mattaniah, who, together with his associates, was in charge of the songs of thanksgiving.*

*9 Bakbukiah and Unni, their associates, stood opposite them in the services.*

*10 Jeshua was the father of Joiakim, Joiakim the father of Eliashib, Eliashib the father of Joiada,*

*11 Joiada the father of Jonathan, and Jonathan the father of Jaddua.*

*12 In the days of Joiakim, these were the heads of the priestly families: of Seraiah's family, Meraiah;*

*of Jeremiah's, Hananiah;*

*13 of Ezra's, Meshullam; of Amariah's, Jehohanan;*

*14 of Malluch's, Jonathan; of Shecaniah's, Joseph;*

*15 of Harim's, Adna; of Meremoth's, Helkai;*

*16 of Iddo's, Zechariah; of Ginnethon's, Meshullam;*

*17 of Abijah's, Zicri; of Miniamin's and of Moadiah's, Piltai;*

*18 of Bilgah's, Shammua; of Shemaiah's, Jehonathan;*

*19 of Joiarib's, Mattenai; of Jedaiah's, Uzzi;*

*20 of Sallu's, Kallai; of Amok's, Eber;*

*21 of Hilkiyah's, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah's, Nethanel.*

*22 The family heads of the Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, Johanan and Jaddua, as well as those of the priests, were recorded in the reign of Darius the Persian.*

*23 The family heads among the descendants of Levi up to the time of Johanan son of Eliashib were recorded in the book of the annals.*

*24 And the leaders of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, Jeshua son of Kadmiel, and their associates, who stood opposite them to give praise and thanksgiving, one section responding to the other, as prescribed by David the man of God.*

*25 Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon and Akkub were gatekeepers who guarded the storerooms at the gates.*

*26 They served in the days of Joiakim son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and of Ezra the priest and scribe.*

This chapter provides us with two lists of names of priests and Levites. Verses 1-11 list the names of those who served during the first period in the group that were responsible for the laying of the foundation and restoration of the temple under Joshua and Zerubbabel. The second list, from verses 12-26, records the ones who came several years later in the period that is covered by Nehemiah's account. The going of one generation and the coming of the next one gives us a view on the wide scope of God's project of restoration. For us, who tend to think in terms of days and years, it is often difficult to see the arc that spans the ages. The period from the first leading away into captivity of King Jehoiakim and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to the completion of the wall covers almost a whole century, more than four generations. It must have been as difficult for the people in Nehemiah's day to think back to the beginning of their ordeal as it is for us to imagine the cares and troubles of our grandparents of great grandparents.

To God, this is only one link in the chain of His eternal plan of salvation. It will be a surprise for us to discover later where we fitted into this sequence.

**Chapter 12:27-43**

*27 At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres.*

*28 The singers also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem—from the villages of the Netophathites,*

*29 from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem.*

*30 When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.*

*31 I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate.*

*32 Hoshaiiah and half the leaders of Judah followed them,*

*33 along with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam,*

*34 Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah,*

*35 as well as some priests with trumpets, and also Zechariah son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph,*

*36 and his associates—Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani—with musical instruments [prescribed by] David the man of God. Ezra the scribe led the procession.*

*37 At the Fountain Gate they continued directly up the steps of the City of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.*

*38 The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people—past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall,*

*39 over the Gate of Ephraim, the Jeshanah Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard they stopped.*

*40 The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; so did I, together with half the officials,*

*41 as well as the priests—Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah and Hananiah with their trumpets—*

*42 and also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malkijah, Elam and Ezer. The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah.*

*43 And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.*

One could ask whether, in view of the existing political tensions, the elaborate festivities to celebrate the completion of the wall were a sensible to do. Nehemiah understood the importance of joy, gratitude, and praise. Those are not luxuries that can be dispensed with; they are necessary elements of a healthy spiritual life. This joyful

celebration also teaches us the importance of distinguishing between that which is important and what is peripheral. Not to celebrate the completion of the wall would mean that the people considered the dilapidated and incomplete state of the city of Jerusalem more important than the fact of God's intervention. Nehemiah's initiative in this shows again how important it is that the joy of the LORD is our strength.

We can see a parallel between the history of Nehemiah and Paul's message to the church in Philippi: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"<sup>31</sup> If we decide to counter our adverse circumstances by rejoicing in the Lord, we will save ourselves many trials and temptations. God has built a great and strong wall around us; we should rejoice wholeheartedly.

#### **Chapter 12:44-47**

*44 At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites.*

*45 They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the singers and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon.*

*46 For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.*

*47 So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron.*

It is interesting to see in these verses the reason for the collection of the tithes. The law had always required the giving of tithes but, in spite of that, the people had neglected the support and care of the priests and Levites. In the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah the people felt again the urge to bring in the needed support. It helped that, as Nehemiah states, "Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites." The people understood that the temple service was the foundation of their lives. They had experienced what life without God could be. The priests and Levites must have understood this themselves and they performed their services in full consciousness of their importance. Priests are bridges between God and man, who receive a blessing from both sides. The greatness of the people's vision, however, is shown in the importance they attached to the singers. The temple music had not been part of the ritual prescribed by law. The ministry of music was the fruit of David's love for God. God had never regulated music by law; He preferred that man would make music as a spontaneous reaction. Songs of praise are man's seal to God's acts of redemption.

#### **Chapter 13:1-14**

*1 On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God,*

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<sup>31</sup> Phil. 4:4

*2 because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.)*

*3 When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.*

*4 Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah,*

*5 and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.*

*6 But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission*

*7 and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God.*

*8 I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room.*

*9 I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.*

*10 I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.*

*11 So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.*

*12 All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms.*

*13 I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because these men were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their brothers.*

*14 Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.*

If the reckoning of time in vs. 6 is the same as in chapter 1:1, then this part of history takes place approximately twelve years after Nehemiah first set out for Jerusalem. There is probably a period of ten years that separates chapter twelve from thirteen. There is not much left of the first love for God that prompted the people to rebuild the walls of the city. As the Ammonites had earlier conquered Israel, not in a military victory but by means of a subtle temptation, so here the enemy of the people, Tobiah, has gained the upper hand. He had managed by marriage to enter into a family relation with the high priest and taken up residence in one of the rooms of the temple where the tithes ought to have been stored. This could only be possible because the bringing of sacrifices had been completely neglected. No support for the priests and Levites that was anymore coming in. No songs of praise went up to the throne of God in heaven. A lack of consciousness of sin and of the need for atonement accounted for the fact that sacrifices were no longer brought in the temple. We understand how this discovery must have cut Nehemiah to the quick. Humanly speaking, the city of Jerusalem would still be a pile of rubble had it not been for him. He had personally brought great sacrifices for the rebuilding of the city. He

may have asked himself the question whether he was the only person whose heart was completely dedicated to the Lord.

Tobiah's residence in the temple was in principle not different from the practices of the elders of Israel, before all of the people had been taken into captivity, as Ezekiel saw them in his vision.<sup>32</sup>

### **Chapter 13:15-22**

***15 In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day.***

***16 Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah.***

***17 I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this wicked thing you are doing-desecrating the Sabbath day?"***

***18 Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath."***

***19 When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day.***

***20 Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem.***

***21 But I warned them and said, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you." From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath.***

***22 Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.***

***Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.***

This section describes Nehemiah's measures against those who desecrated the Sabbath. The people who committed this sacrilege were the same who had pledged themselves to keep the Sabbath several years before.<sup>33</sup> The vision of resting in God's rest of creation and atonement is a very fragile one that will break when the slighted pressure is exerted upon it. We only need little pressure from the merchants outside the walls to put our trust in human resources instead of in the Lord's provision. The best confession of faith man can make is in the words of the psalmist: "It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man."<sup>34</sup>

The attack of the enemy did not only come in the form of an effort to mix the offspring of the chosen people with foreign elements, but it was particularly geared to the corruption of the priesthood. The son of the high priest had become the son-in-law of

<sup>32</sup> See Ezek. 8:7-12

<sup>33</sup> See ch. 10:31

<sup>34</sup> Ps. 118:8



Sanballat. The immediate result of this liaison would have been that there would no longer have been any son of the high priest who could inherit his father's position. The ultimate corruption of the people of Israel would have made the coming of the Messiah impossible.

The sin of the men of Israel consisted, first of all, that they had divorced their first wife, who was an Israelite woman. They had lost their vision on the coming of the Messiah by mixing their seed with foreigners.