

**EZRA-NEHEMIAH**  
**BUILDING WITH GOD FOR GOD'S PURPOSES**

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Introduction

This series of lessons on Ezra and Nehemiah has the sub-title "Building with God for God's Purposes." Ezra and Nehemiah were both builders, in the physical but also the spiritual sense. As such they provide instructive examples to us of how to be focused on God's purposes as they worked diligently, persistently, and patiently under difficult and distracting circumstances. We will be able to see many admirable qualities in these men. We may also see some personality traits that we find less likable, but even that is instructive. It is not necessarily the winners of personality contexts who accomplish the most for God. And, as everyone should know, God uses the available and the obedient people, not the perfect people.

Despite their possible shortcomings in our eyes, these two individuals provide inspiring examples of commitment to God's people and availability to God's purposes. Living in difficult and discouraging times, they nevertheless caught a vision for God's work and they conveyed that vision to others. When some might have thought Israel's glory was all in the past, these leaders were used by the Lord to show the way forward to a more glorious future.

From the books of Ezra and Nehemiah themselves you can see that their work was, to some extent at least, going on in the same generation. The two books are so closely related that at one time they were treated as a single book. Yet the story of Ezra stands on its own, as does (even more so) the story of Nehemiah.

I should warn you that in some places the narrative in these books jumps forward to a related event and then back in time to resume the story. Thus the exact chronology is not always easy to follow. In my comments I will try to give some guidance in these trickier sections, but I will also attempt to keep such questions to a minimum. Sorting out the historical timeline is less important for our purposes than observing the faithfulness and courage of these men used by God in a critical time in Israel's history.

For your reference, the following chart shows the essential timeline (all dates are B.C.):

587 B.C.	538	458	445
Fall of Jerusalem	First return	Ezra	Nehemiah
Temple destroyed	from Babylon	Civil &	City wall
	Temple rebuilt	religious	rebuilt
	520-516	reform	Religious
	(Haggai, Zechariah)		reform
	Zerubbabel		

For this series, the material will be divided up as follows

Lesson 1	Ezra 1-3	Lesson 5	Nehemiah 4-6:14
Lesson 2	Ezra 4-6	Lesson 6	Nehemiah 6:15-8
Lesson 3	Ezra 7-10	Lesson 7	Nehemiah 9-10
Lesson 4	Nehemiah 1-3	Lesson 8	Nehemiah 11-13

[Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New International Version.]

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH

### Lesson 1

#### Ezra 1-3

#### Introduction to Ezra

Ezra provides a historical narrative that covers a fairly long period of time. Yet the book is essentially about one topic: restoration. After the Babylonian captivity, the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem, the temple of the LORD, and the worship and religious life of the Jews was a difficult and slow process. Ezra's arrival on the scene in 458 B.C. (ch. 7) was some eighty years after the restoration process had begun in 538 B.C. (ch. 1). Ezra recounts some of the difficulties and triumphs of the period before his arrival in Jerusalem as well as during his tenure there as an appointed official of the Persian Empire. Ezra was also a Levitical priest, a teacher of the Mosaic Law, and a religious reformer. So Ezra was both a civil officer sent by a Gentile empire and a spiritual leader sent by the LORD.

#### Historical Background

The events described by the first six chapters of Ezra occurred before the time of Ezra himself. He enters the story only when we get to chapter seven, about eighty years after the events described in chapter one. But those first six chapters provide the historical context for the career of Ezra. Since Ezra begins his narrative with the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity, a quick review of the history leading up to this book will be helpful.

You will recall that the nation of Israel had divided into two parts after the death of Solomon (about 930 B.C.). The northern kingdom was known after that as Israel (sometimes called Ephraim, the name of the dominant tribe). It was also referred to as Samaria, the name of its capital city. The southern kingdom remained under the rule of the descendants of David and was known as Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem.

The history of the separate kingdoms is covered in 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. At this point we need not concern ourselves with all the ups and downs they went through, but it is important to be aware of the following key events:

(1) In 721 B.C., the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered and destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians killed many thousands but also carried away as captives many thousands of the inhabitants of Israel. They also replaced them with captives from other nations which they had conquered. This resulted in a mixed race of people known as the Samaritans. This is important for the background of New Testament times but also for the events of Ezra's and Nehemiah's day. The northern kingdom of Israel as such ceased to exist in 721 B.C.

(2) In 587 B.C., the southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonian Empire, which had earlier destroyed and replaced the Assyrians as the "big power" of the ancient Near East. The Babylonians also took many thousands of Jews captive, especially the leading citizens, including the king, Jehoiachin. They destroyed the magnificent temple built by Solomon and tore down the walls of Jerusalem. (See 2 Kings 25 for an account of the fall of Jerusalem.) The devastation was virtually complete, but (unlike the Assyrian practice) the Babylonians did not import other peoples into the area. The relatively small number of inhabitants left in the land of Judah were poor, weak, and without effective leadership of their own. They were completely under the domination of Babylon, until that empire met its eventual doom at the hands of the Medes and Persians in 538 B.C.

Ironically, the Jews who went to Babylon as captives ended up in more prosperous conditions than the Jews who stayed in Judah. After the initial trauma of their deportation, they adjusted to their new surroundings rather well. Their children and grandchildren regarded the area of Mesopotamia as their home, so much so that many chose to remain in that area rather than return to Judah when given the opportunity by the Persians.

(3) The policy of the Medo-Persian Empire (which is later simply called the Persian Empire) was to allow the captive peoples of the Babylonian era to return to their own lands. This is where the book of Ezra picks up the historical narrative.

## Ezra 1-3: The Return and Beginning to Rebuild

### Chapter 1

The first chapter records the decree of Cyrus, king of Persia, which allowed the Jews to go back to Judah (538 B.C.). This is the first of seven official documents which Ezra includes in his book (notice also the overlap with the end of 2 Chronicles). It is interesting to note that a pagan Persian government adopts this policy which carries out the previously revealed plan of God. Even before the captivity began, Jeremiah had prophesied that the exile would last for 70 years (Jere. 25:12), which it did (the first large group of captives was taken to Babylon in 597, ten years before the temple was destroyed, and the temple was not rebuilt finally until 516 B.C.). Even before that, Isaiah had prophesied that a leader named Cyrus would "rebuild my city and set my exiles free" (Isa. 45:13). Just as God had used a pagan nation (Babylon) and its ruler (Nebuchadnezzar) to punish Judah for prolonged unfaithfulness, so he used a pagan nation (Persia) and its ruler (Cyrus) to prove his own faithfulness and mercy toward Judah.

Although the quoted document refers to the LORD (Yahweh), that does not mean Cyrus was a devoted believer in Israel's God. But since he is talking about Jerusalem and the Jews, who are worshipers of the LORD, he uses their terminology. Cyrus' motivation was no doubt strictly pragmatic: it seemed to be in the best interests of the Empire to let its subject peoples have their own culture, including worship of their traditional gods.

The material assistance of the Persian neighbors (vs. 6) reminds us of the generosity of common Egyptians to the Israelites as the time of the Exodus (Exod. 12:35-36). (The parallel between the Exodus and the return from Babylonian captivity is also referred to by Isaiah 43:16-19).

Ezra also records the inventory of vessels and other articles which these Jews had returned to them from the new government. These articles had been part of the booty carried off by the Babylonians decades before. The Jews were carrying them back to Jerusalem in preparation to rebuild the temple, something which was not in fact accomplished for another twenty years. (In vs. 8, 11, Sheshbazzar may or may not be the same person as Zerubbabel mentioned by Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra 2:2.)

### Chapter 2

The second chapter of Ezra provides a roster of the families which were part of this return to Judah. (The Nehemiah mentioned in 2:2 is not the same as the one whose name is given to the biblical book; this is almost 100 years before that Nehemiah.) You might note the reference (in vs. 59) to some among the immigrants who could not prove that they were really Jews. This is important in light of the historical circumstances (exiles returning to reclaim ancestral lands) and the issues addressed in both Ezra and Nehemiah (especially mixed marriages).

Note also (in vs. 62) the exclusion from the priesthood of certain men because they could not demonstrate their lineage. Their status was put on hold until "a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim" would be able to discern whether these men in question should be permitted to participate in priestly activities (vs. 63). You will recall that the Urim and

Thummim are mentioned in the Law of Moses as somehow used by the priests (it is never made completely clear how) to determine divine answers to questions which could not be resolved by ordinary means (Exod. 28:30; Num. 27:21).

The whole company of those who returned to Judah at this time was about 50,000 people. Remember that the land and city had not been vacant, but they had been sparsely populated during the time of the exile. More than sheer numbers, this returning group was a vital boost to the land because they were leaders, both in the sphere of government and worship, and because they brought material resources with them, as well as Persian authorization to begin restoration of their homeland.

The fact that some of the returning Jews were able to make sizable contributions toward the (re)building fund (vss. 68-69) shows that at least those families had prospered during the exile in the Babylonian Empire. They also brought with them a disproportionately high number of servants (vs. 65). Their evident wealth helps explain why many Jews stayed behind in Persia—they were settled there and were doing well. Those who returned to Judah came back to a devastated and impoverished land full of hardships and surrounded by discouraging circumstances. By the time of Haggai's prophetic ministry (18 years later, in 520 B.C.), the relative wealth of these returning Jews appears to have dissipated to a significant degree (see Hag. 1:6, 9; 2:17). According to the word of the LORD, they lost the wealth God had given them because they had made their own houses their priority rather than the house of the LORD (Hag. 1:3, 9).

The land to which the Jewish refugees returned was only a fraction of the size it had once been. It was only about 25 miles from northern border to southern, and only about 32 miles wide, and much of this was not suitable for cultivation (according to Avi-Yonah, as cited by Edwin Yamauchi in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 570). The Samaritans to the north were hostile neighbors, who repeatedly tried to hinder the efforts to rebuild the Jewish community, as we will see in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

### Chapter 3

In the third chapter of Ezra, important tangible steps are taken toward restoration of worship and religious observances: an altar to the LORD is built, sacrifices are offered (vs. 3), the Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated (vs. 4), and the foundation of a new temple is laid (vs. 10).

The returning Jews begin very soon to restore the worship of the LORD as previously practiced in Jerusalem. Even without a temple, they build an altar (vs. 2). It took some courage to do this, as verse three gives us the first hint of opposition from the surrounding people. This probably refers to the Samaritans, who later appear as serious enemies of the effort to rebuild Jerusalem (4:1-5). Those who saw a renewed Judah as a threat would not want to see Jewish worship renewed. The fact that there was a threat from the surrounding people was all the more reason, of course, for God's people to live up to their primary calling: to be a holy people, worshipping God and offering him sacrifices.

Worship was fundamental to their identity, because it reflected their covenant relationship with the LORD. It was their unfaithfulness to worship the one true God *alone* which had brought about the Babylonian exile. Surely the end of that exile must be marked by the resumption of true worship of the true God--the LORD who had promised this land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who had brought the nation out of Egyptian bondage and had brought them into the land, who had now brought them back to the land, in keeping with his steadfast promises. The words "in accordance with what is written" (NIV) show us that they were being careful to follow the instructions God had given regarding true worship (vss. 2, 4). They knew from harsh, national experience that worship of Almighty God was not something to be guided by human whim but by the revealed divine will.

The celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles marked the resumption of the prescribed religious observances which mark the Jewish year. This feast commemorates the wilderness journeys of Israel on the way to the Promised Land centuries before, when the whole nation lived in temporary, portable shelters for forty years (Lev. 23:42-43). Thus there is a certain appropriateness to its being the first feast celebrated by those returning from a long exile away from their ancestral home.

Naturally the laying of the temple's foundation was a cause of celebration. A "great shout of praise" was raised to the LORD by many who were there (vs. 11). Others, however, had a different reaction. Those old enough to remember the grandeur and size of Solomon's temple saw that the new one was going to be much smaller and simpler (vs. 12; see also Hag. 2:3; Zech. 4:10--some "despised the day of small things"). Perhaps these people were glad that a new temple was being built after decades without one, but they could not help feeling great sorrow over the memory of what once had been. Judah might be rebuilt as a nation, the city of Jerusalem and the temple might be rebuilt, but there would not be a quick, easy return to those glorious times of the past. (About five centuries later, Herod would build the magnificent temple about which we read in the Gospels, the temple which was itself destroyed in 70 A.D..)

Both the rejoicing and the weeping were loud that day and completely intermingled so that it was hard to tell who was happy and who was overcome with sad memories of what used to be (vs. 13). What was not known at the time by anyone was how long it would take to build the temple begun that day. Opposition from outsiders and discouragement within the ranks would cause a delay of 18 years before resumption of the building process (520-516).

From Ezra's brief but poignant description of the beginning of restoration, we see that the hope for a brighter tomorrow does not completely or quickly erase the regret for past losses. Yet it is good to remember that even a small, new beginning was nothing less than a miracle--a miracle which shows God's faithfulness to his saving purposes. Although God had allowed Judah to go through great loss and hardship, and although the time of restoration was slow and difficult, we can still see God's hand persistently at work in Judah's history. Even we Gentiles can praise God for that, for two reasons:

- (1) This is an example for us to trust God in tough times, especially when we know we are back on track and trying to do God's will.
- (2) God's persistence with Israel was also for our benefit, since the Savior of the whole world would come from Israel in centuries to come (about 450 years after Ezra wrote this book).

Possible discussion questions

1. Is total recovery always possible, when great losses have occurred as the consequences of sin? Is there a price to pay in following the path of restoration? What are some of the difficulties? What is the price if we don't seek restoration? (This can be discussed on either a personal or a national level.)
2. Is restoration about "turning back the clock" or going forward? What is the most effective way to think about the process of healing and/or reconciliation after the suffering of wounds or loss?
3. What are some of the ways in which our community or nation needs to seek restoration? What are some of the ways the church needs to seek it? What are the obstacles or challenges?
4. In the process of restoration, what is relationship between human responsibility and God's grace?

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH

### Lesson 2

#### Ezra 4-6

#### Opposition and Discouragement

In chapters 1-3, we saw Jewish exiles come back to Jerusalem from Babylon in 538 B.C. They came with resources of their own, gifts from their pagan neighbors in Babylon, determination to rebuild the temple and city, and--very importantly--official authorization from the Persian Empire to restore their place and practice of worship. We saw the Jewish returnees resume sacrifices to the LORD, once again observe the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths), and actually lay the foundation for the new temple. It may have been a small start, but it was a good one. In today's lesson, chs. 4-6, we hear about the opposition to the rebuilding efforts and other difficulties which the Jews encountered from 538 until the time of Ezra's arrival in chapter 7 (458).

#### Chapter 4

Who are these "enemies" or "adversaries" of Judah (vs. 1)? For one thing it seems they want to help. Why would the Jews, appearing to need all the help they could get, refuse them so emphatically? (vs. 3) For another thing, whoever these neighbors were, they were part of the same Persian Empire as the Jewish people; how could they be adversaries?

They are called "enemies" or "adversaries" in the text before we as readers are told why they are so regarded. Once we read on, however, we discover that these were not well-meaning neighbors just trying to be helpful. From vs. 4-5 we see that these neighbors did everything they could, from intimidation to legal action in the courts of Persia, to stop the progress of restoration in Jerusalem. We will see this opposition persist on through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra knew exactly what he was talking about in 4:1 when he called them enemies.

Probably the returning Jewish exiles figured out the motives of these enemies fairly quickly. Remember that in 3:3 we saw that there was some reason to fear the "peoples around them," but that the Jews had proceeded to build the LORD's altar in spite of them. No doubt threatening talk and rumors of trouble had already come to their ears. The Jewish leaders had ample reason to suspect the offer of help in 4:2, knowing that the offer was not sincere but was an attempt by a larger, more entrenched culture to swallow them up.

Another reason for refusing this offer is found in the offer itself. These would-be helpers describe themselves this way: "we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here" (vs. 2). These are the Samaritans, a mixed race produced by the Assyrian policy of dislocating the peoples they had conquered. When Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C., they took Israelites to other locations in their empire and replaced them with captives they had taken in other conquests. This was the Assyrian way of maintaining domination.

These people brought into the area formerly occupied by Israel had in fact adopted many features of the religion of Israel as they found it being practiced. So would they not be 'friends in the faith' with Judah, just as they claimed? Not exactly. Remember that from the time Jeroboam had first broken away the northern tribes from the Davidic dynasty after Solomon's death, the worship of the LORD in northern Israel had been corrupted, often in the grossest kind of mixture with pagan practices. Throughout northern Israel's separate history the golden calf shrines set up by Jeroboam at Bethel and Dan had been a snare, an idolatrous practice introduced into the worship of the LORD (1 Kings 12:26-30). Jeroboam had also appointed priests who were not Levites, and he introduced other innovations contrary to God's instructions to Israel (1 Kings 12:31-32).

Jeroboam's motivation in all these changes was largely political. He did not want his subjects to travel to Jerusalem to worship. He was afraid he would lose their loyalty if they did. Jeroboam was a crafty politician on this score, but he incurred God's judgment for his acts, which plagued northern Israel from then on with a persistent, glaring disobedience to God's specific commandments regarding the temple worship and God's choice for priesthood.

The displaced peoples who had eventually become the Samaritans thus adopted a form of the worship of Yahweh which had already been corrupted by the people of northern Israel. They further corrupted it by beliefs and practices which they brought with them. "They worshiped the LORD, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought" (2 Kings 17:33; see 2 Kings 17:24-41 for details). We know from the practice of the Samaritans in Jesus' day, for example, that they regarded the Books of Moses as Scripture, but their version was significantly different from that of the Jews, especially with regard to the place of worship. Also, in a view they shared with the Sadducees of Jesus' day, they did not regard the prophets after Moses as authoritative Scripture.

When you put yourself in the place of Zerubbabel and the other Jewish leaders of the time, it is easier to see why they completely refused the offer of help from the Samaritans. The Jews themselves were just beginning to recover from the brink of perishing as a nation. Why? The exile had been God's chastisement for their prolonged unfaithfulness to the covenant with him. Now that they are being given another chance to be faithful to that covenant, should they enter into partnership with those who have so greatly corrupted that covenant?

No, it would be better for the Jews in Jerusalem not to accept such help, for it was a danger to their own faithfulness. Perhaps the resources of the Samaritans were a temptation for the struggling Jews, but the risks were too great. Their faithfulness (and possibly survival) as God's covenant people was at stake.

The refusal was costly, as the offer of help turned into dogged opposition (vss. 4-5). From the time of Cyrus to the time of Darius covers the period from 538 to 486. Then in vs. 6 ff., we read about their continuing opposition during the reigns of Xerxes (486-464, time of Esther) and Artaxerxes (486-423). These last two were Emperors after the Jews had completed the temple in 516 B.C. Ezra is showing us that the opposition of the Samaritans did not cease with the building of the temple, but continued on down to his day (458). The careful reader needs to be aware that Ezra has jumped forward in time here, and he will come back to the time of temple building at the end of this chapter.

Ezra inserts here the letter which Rehum sent to Artaxerxes, beginning in vs. 9. This letter opposes the Jewish work to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (vs. 12) many years after the temple had been finished. So Ezra has jumped forward in time to discuss this incident which occurred during Ezra's lifetime. At the end of the chapter (vs. 24), Ezra goes back to the time of the work on the temple. Apparently, the work on the temple ceased because the Jews became discouraged by the Samaritan opposition and distracted by the pursuit of their own prosperity (so says Haggai) in a difficult time. They were *not* forbidden by the government to build the temple; they were forbidden to re-build the walls of the city, and that prohibition came later.

Notice how Rehum identifies himself as commanding officer in Samaria among the people deported there by Ashurbanipal (an earlier Assyrian king). The complaint against the Jews (vss. 12 ff.) is really a warning that the Jews are planning a revolt against the Persian Empire. Presenting himself as simply a devoted subject of Persia (vs. 14), Rehum warns Artaxerxes that he stands to lose a lot of money if he lets the Jews rebuild their city walls and declare their independence (vs. 13). He reminds him, too, of Jerusalem's past history of rebelling against previous rulers (as in the many conflicts Judah had experienced with Assyria and Babylon). Empires are conglomerates of different peoples and are always susceptible to



paranoia about possible uprisings of the subject peoples under them (just like slave-owners in the Old South used to fear slave rebellions). Rehum's strategy was quite clever.

Artaxerxes had the records searched and, sure enough, Rehum was right. Not only that, but he found that Jerusalem had once been a powerful seat of government which had received tribute money from others (in the days of David and Solomon), rather than paying it as they were at present to the Persian Empire (vss. 19-20). Artaxerxes was worried by what his research had turned up. He ordered all rebuilding work in Jerusalem to stop until such time as he decreed otherwise (vs. 21). Rehum's strategy had worked; we can only imagine how eager he was to enforce the decree (vs. 23). (This suspension of work on the city walls is a problem which Nehemiah addresses later.)

Although Rehum's letter and the response of Artaxerxes come years after the events we read about in the next two chapters, Ezra's insertion of that episode here helps to give us a feel for the kind of hostility the Jews had to deal with throughout the period. (It would have been less confusing for us readers, however, if he had followed a more chronological order in writing!)

Verse 24 of chapter 4 jumps back logically to the events of the first four verses of the chapter. By referring to "the second year of the reign of Darius" (520 B.C.) this verse also connects us to the beginning of chapter five and the resumption of the temple building project.

## Chapter 5

Once the people lost their enthusiasm for rebuilding the temple, fear, inertia, and distraction took over. Of the people present at the celebration of laying the foundation (end of ch. 3), who would have believed that the project would be interrupted for eighteen years? But God had not given up even if the people had. God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to stir the people up and especially to encourage their leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua (Joshua), to go back to work on the temple.

It would be useful to look at both of these prophets' ministry in their own words. Zechariah is by far the more difficult of the two prophetic books, but the following passages are relatively clear and are pertinent to the rebuilding of the temple:

- 4:6-10 "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit"; also clear references to completing the temple, with Zerubbabel, the governor, involved in both the beginning and the finishing of the project
- 6:9-15 refers to Joshua (or Jeshua) as the priest who will build the temple
- 9:9-13 a new season of blessing is promised for those who commit to finishing the temple

The book of Haggai is much shorter, clearly dated in 520 B.C., and solely concerned with motivating Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the others to new efforts in building the temple. The main thrust of Haggai's message is that the people had been too busy building their own houses and trying to "get ahead." They kept putting off the temple project. Haggai told them that putting God's house first was the key to the prosperity they desired. See especially the following verses:

- 1:2-3 some had the attitude that 'now is not a good time' to build the Lord's house, yet they had gone ahead with building their own
- 1:8-9 misplaced priorities caused their impoverishment
- 1:12ff Zerubbabel and Joshua obey God and lead the people
- 2:4-5 God promises his presence to strengthen; mention of God's Spirit similar to Zechariah 4:6
- 2:6-9 God will bring the resources to build the temple; a greater glory is still in the future; the drawing of the Gentiles (a reference to New

## Testament realities)

Although the people had neglected the temple and had let opposition, their own poverty, and their concern for their own households hold them back, the LORD had not forgotten his people nor his purpose. God took the initiative in sending prophets to encourage the people with a word from him. Yes, that word contained a clear rebuke for their misplaced priorities, but it also contained promises of God's enablement to do what he had called them to do, and promises that he would multiply their blessings if they would obey. These prophets' words are good examples of 'edification, exhortation, and consolation' (1 Cor. 14:3).

The remainder of this chapter records an inquiry made by Tattenai, the Persian governor of the region known as "Trans-Euphrates" or "Beyond the River" (from the Persian perspective). Once the Jews picked up their tools again and resumed work on the temple, the governor wanted to know what was going on, and he was 'taking names' (vss. 3-4). But he did not, apparently, try to stop the work until he could check out their authorization (vs. 5). His letter of inquiry is quoted by Ezra in vss. 7-17. In his letter, Tattenai cites the answer which the Jews had given him (vss. 11-16). He wants to know whether their answer is truthful. Do they have authorization from the government to be doing this, as they claim? (vs. 17)

If the Jews had not delayed for eighteen years what they had begun in 538, this question would not have arisen. But now, after such a delay, someone has to check the archives. Fortunately, the archives seem to have been kept in an orderly state, and the answer which comes back from the royal court is found in the beginning of chapter six.

### Chapter 6

Tattenai's request for information uncovered more than he anticipated. Yes, the Jews did have authorization to build their temple. Furthermore, according to the decree of Cyrus (long since deceased by this time), "the costs are to be paid by the royal treasury" (6:4). The current Persian ruler, Darius, stuck by Cyrus' decree and ordered Tattenai to abide by it. He was told not to interfere (vs. 6). Furthermore, he was commanded to pay the expenses of those doing the building and provide them whatever they might need! (vss. 8-9) Darius attached a stern warning to obey orders (vss. 11-12). Tattenai got the message and did as he was told (vs. 13).

This surprising turn of events brought a quick fulfillment of Haggai's prophecy which had given Zerubbabel the courage to resume the delayed project (Hag. 2:6-9). Now there would be no shortage of money or anything else needed to complete the project, but this providential supply would never have come their way if someone (Tattenai) had not tried to hinder them. And Tattenai would never have gotten involved if they had not taken initiative. God had used even the opposition and suspicion of Tattenai to further his divine plan!

Of course, with a little reflection the reader realizes that this provision for adequate funding had been there all along, since the decree of Cyrus in 538. Had the Jews been unaware of it? Had they forgotten it? Surely Zerubbabel and the others had known of it, but because of their fear or their preoccupation with their own lives and property, they had simply not pressed the issue. Are we sometimes like them?

We know, if we stop to think about it, that God's power is more than adequate for whatever he calls us to do. Yet we often hold back, because of fear, rebellion, or our own misplaced attention and priorities. Acknowledging the existence of an abundant resource and obediently relying on that resource are related but not identical. You can't rely on it without being aware of it, but you can be aware of it and still not rely on it.

The building project took about four years from the time of resuming the project until finishing it (520-516 B.C.). Ezra credits the "command of the God of Israel" but he also, justly,

mentions the decrees of Cyrus and Darius (vs. 14). His mention of Artaxerxes, however, has a different motive. His name is put in this verse as a sort of courtesy to the ruler of Ezra's day, since his decree allowed the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem during Ezra's and Nehemiah's time. Chronologically he comes later (464-423 B.C.) than the rebuilding of the temple, but in terms of his benevolence toward the Jews he is worthy of mention alongside Cyrus and Darius.

The dedication of the completed temple was, of course, a joyous occasion. The number of sacrificed animals seems large to us (vs. 17), but not by comparison with the numbers at the dedication of Solomon's Temple centuries before. In 1 Kings 8:63, we find that Solomon's dedication service used 22,000 bulls and 120,000 sheep! That is just one measure of how Judah in 516 B.C. compared with Israel of Solomon's time. Notice that the Jews still identify themselves as the twelve tribes of Israel (vs. 17), despite the drastic reduction in size as a people. Most of the nation now came from one of three tribes, Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, with just a sprinkling from the others.

Passover that year was a special celebration, not just of the deliverance many generations earlier in the escape from Egypt, but also of the more recent miracle which enabled them to rebuild the temple of the LORD (vs. 22)

[You might notice that Persia is sometimes still referred to as Assyria (vs. 22). Persia had actually taken the place of Babylon, which had taken the place of Assyria--all this within less than a century. Referring to Persia as Assyria is somewhat like the way we still have not broken the habit of referring to Russia as the Soviet Union.]

Possible discussion questions

1. What risks do we run when we rely on the resources of people outside the church? Is it never right to accept such help?
2. How do we acknowledge the existence of human adversaries to the gospel and the church but at the same time remember that we do not fight against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12)?
3. Have you ever started some project or personal discipline which fell by the wayside after a short period without being completed? Have you ever resumed such a project or discipline? What did it take to get you motivated again?
4. Have you ever seen opposition to the gospel turned to the church's advantage, as happened with Tattenai's opposition to Zerubbabel?
5. Are we making use of all that we know God has provided us for the work to which he calls us? If not, why not?
6. What is the difference between the help offered by the Samaritans, which the Jews refused, and the Persian government's funding of the building costs, which the Jews accepted?

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH

### Lesson 3

#### Ezra 7-10

#### Ezra: the Man and the Mission

With this lesson we come to Ezra's own time and his very important contributions to the rebuilding of Judah. The first six chapters covered the period from the first return of Jews from Babylonian exile (538) to the completion of the new temple (516), with one insertion (4:7-23) about a later episode within Ezra's lifetime. Except for that insertion, those six chapters covered a little more than 20 years. A period of almost 60 years, from the building of the temple until Ezra's arrival in 458, is passed over with almost no mention (4:6 notes an accusation from the Samaritans). Chapters 7-10 covers a much shorter period of time, dealing only with Ezra's coming to Jerusalem and his response to a serious social and religious problem—mixed marriages. (In fact, the rest of Ezra and all of Nehemiah occur during the reign of Artaxerxes in the Persian Empire.)

#### Chapter 7

Ezra comes to Judah from among the many Jews who had remained in Mesopotamia after the Babylonian Captivity. He gives his family lineage at the beginning of the chapter not just because he is proud of it, but because it is a necessary element in giving him the authority to do what God calls him to do in Judah. Not having grown up in Judah, he would arrive there as a "johnny-come-lately" in the sense that he had not been personally involved in the earlier project of rebuilding the temple, re-establishing the worship of the LORD, and enduring the hardships of rebuilding Jewish society. Yet Ezra would exercise powerful authority. What was his authorization?

First of all, he was a descendant of Aaron (7:5), qualified not only to be a priest as a Levite but also a high priest. Second, he was "a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given" (vs. 6). Third, he was committed not only to the study and teaching of the Law but also to its observance (vs. 10). He lived what he studied, and taught what he was living by. Fourth, "the king [Artaxerxes] had granted him everything he asked" (vs. 6), meaning that he had been given full authority by the empire (more details on this later in the chapter). Fifth, "the hand of the LORD his God was on him" (vss. 6, 9; similar wording repeated several times). By birth, training, personal integrity, government authorization, and divine appointment, Ezra was qualified to perform a unique and pivotal role in stabilizing and shaping Judaism. In Jewish tradition, Ezra would come to be regarded as virtually a 'second Moses' because of his lasting impact on the practice of the Jewish faith.

As he often does, Ezra includes here the exact wording of an official document, this time a copy of the authorization he received from Artaxerxes (vss. 12-26). Notice that Ezra is given financial and material resources by the government along with authority to ask for further assistance from governmental officers in the Trans-Euphrates region of the Empire (vss. 15-23). Those regional officials were explicitly forbidden to impose taxes on the priests and other ministers at the temple in Jerusalem (vs. 24). Ezra is granted civil as well as religious authority, including the power to appoint magistrates and judges (vs. 25) and to teach and enforce God's law among the Jews (vs. 26). Ezra's authority to punish the rebellious includes the death penalty as well as lesser measures (vs. 26).

Ezra is grateful both to Artaxerxes and to the LORD for his opportunity to serve God's purposes in this way (vs. 27-28).

## Chapter 8

You might note that the number of Jews emigrating back to Judah with Ezra is much smaller than the party which returned in 538. Then there were about 50,000. Ezra's group contains fewer than 2000. This would have been only a small part of the total number of Jews still living in Mesopotamia.

Before starting the journey (which would take four months and cover about 1000 miles), Ezra takes careful stock of the company who are going. He finds that he needs to recruit some more Levites, which he is able to do (8:15-20). We need to realize that Ezra was asking for considerable personal sacrifices to be made by these men and their families, who would be leaving a settled, relatively secure life in Mesopotamia, to give themselves to the task of rebuilding and reform which awaited them in Judah.

Ezra reports a time of fasting and praying before the trip with its inherent dangers (vss. 21-23), especially since they would be carrying considerable treasure with them (vss. 25-26). He decided against asking for a military escort (8:22). (Nehemiah's attitude on this issue will be different (Neh. 2:7-9).) This might not seem prudent, but Ezra was concerned for the integrity of his witness (vs. 22). That Ezra was in fact a very prudent administrator is shown by the way he handled the distribution of the money and articles to be transported to Jerusalem (vss. 24-34).

The point of this paragraph is not the honesty of the various individuals entrusted with the safe arrival of the treasure; rather it is that the administration was 'above board' and trustworthy. It was a matter of record who had been entrusted with how much. That kind of accountability is important not only as a deterrent to someone who might be tempted to embezzle; it is also a shield against suspicion by anyone else. Even when you have done nothing wrong, it is hard to prove to someone who suspects wrongdoing when there is no public record to vouch for you. Ezra's records were a prudent safeguard against theft and false accusations alike.

## Chapter 9

Nothing mentioned by Ezra in chs. 7 and 8 has prepared us for the painful issue which becomes the focus for chs. 9 and 10. Ezra came to Jerusalem expecting to be a civil officer and a religious leader and teacher. He seems not to have been expecting to deal with the issue of mixed marriages, at least not on such a large scale. The leaders in Judah reported the situation to him (9:1-3). Perhaps after hearing Ezra teach from Moses' Law, they realized how seriously in violation of God's will they had allowed themselves to become. Mixing with idolatrous people and adopting some of their ways had been a problem for Israel for centuries, something they were warned about even before they came to Palestine under Joshua (Deut. 7:3-6), a snare which significantly contributed to the demise of Judah to its present weakness. Yet here they were, even after the severe chastening of the Babylonian Captivity, still joining themselves to pagan families and those who worshiped idols.

Ezra's immediate reaction (vss. 3-4) was to express personal grief and dismay, even to the point of pulling hair from his head and beard. (Compare Nehemiah, who pulls out the hair of another! Neh. 13:25) What is most interesting about Ezra's prayer (vss. 6-15) is his "identificational repentance." He repents, in the strongest and most specific way, for sins which he has not personally committed. He says, "I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face" (vs. 6). He confesses "our sins" and "our guilt" both for his contemporaries and for his forefathers (vss. 6-7). Nehemiah will later pray in a similar way (Neh. 1). Prophets of an earlier time had likewise prayed for the people as though they themselves had incurred the guilt of the people's sins (see Jeremiah's book, Lamentations, and Dan. 9:3-19). In identifying themselves identified with those who had sinned (even though they had not sinned in this particular way), the prophets who prayed in this manner are like Jesus Christ, who gave his life for our sins although he was completely sinless (see 2 Cor. 5:21).

Ezra acknowledges that it is only because of God's mercy that there is a "remnant" of Jews left and that they have been privileged to rebuild the temple (vs. 8). He acknowledges that even now they are, in reality, still "slaves" of the Persians (vs. 9), yet "our God has not deserted us in our bondage" and has made the Persian rulers favorably disposed toward the Jews.

Given all this history of past sin, and God's mercy in bringing a remnant safely through the chastisement of the captivity, it is all the more painful to confess the sins of the present generation: "What can we say after this?" (vs. 10) There can be no attempt to plead ignorance of the Law; the violation was clear and Ezra confesses the transgression specifically (vs. 12; see Deut. 7:1-3; also Malachi 2:10-16). He confesses that God would be fully justified in punishing them even more than before and removing even the remnant (vss. 13-14). There can be no excuse or any basis for appeal whatever except the righteousness of God (vs. 15).

## Chapter 10

Ezra's prayer of repentance draws a crowd. This is somewhat the effect that protesters seek to obtain when they go on hunger strikes or allow themselves to be arrested. Ezra's public and energetic prayer caused others to join his prayer of repentance. It also elicited a resolution to change--real repentance is not just being sorry but also taking steps to bring change in the behavior or the situation.

The course of action which Ezra would enforce on the offenders was actually suggested by others who pledged their support (vss. 2-4). They were moved by Ezra's example and sincerity. He could simply have enforced the Law with the authority he had, without popular support, but he chose to lead in this way. Notice that he continued to mourn and fast even after the decision had been made to take action (vss. 5-6).

Ezra is willing to use the authority he had been given by Artaxerxes to require people to come to an assembly. Forfeiture of property is a serious threat, but remember that these were people who had received (back) their property by the decree of the same government which authorized Ezra to take it back (7:26) if they did not obey the government. What the government gives, the government can take back. That is looking at it from only a secular viewpoint, however. Who had really given Judah the land? Did God have a right to require his people to live in his land according to his law?

Once the men are gathered, Ezra presents the situation bluntly (vss. 9-11). The crowd agrees with his statement but suggests that this is going to have to be handled over many days, and they need to get out of the rain! (vss. 12-14). The support for rectifying the situation is almost unanimous (vs. 15). It is interesting to note that, in the list of those who had to send away their foreign wives (10:18ff.), the priests are listed first!

The investigation of individual cases took about three months (vss. 16-17). We may wonder what an investigation sounded like. We may also wonder whether there was any flexibility. What if the "foreign wife" had completely adopted the faith of Israel (as Ruth had done)? Was there any allowance for a Rahab or a Ruth, non-Israelites who became part of Israel? (See Matt. 1:5: both Rahab and Ruth became part of the lineage of Jesus!) Was being born to another race the only criterion for deciding that she must be sent away? We may wonder, but we are not told the answer to these questions.

Another question which might come to mind is, what happened to these divorced women (and their children)? We do not know for sure, but probably they went back to live with their original families, which would be according to the customs of their time (and not unknown today). Even if they were not thrown out into the street, so to speak, the measures enforced by Ezra and the other elders of Judah may seem very harsh, even unloving and devoid of

compassion. I don't think we need to try to defend the action of Ezra, but we should try to understand the circumstances which seemed to them to justify these actions.

God had clearly forbidden Israel from entering into marriage with the Gentile people who occupied Palestine before them (Deut. 7:1-6). On the other hand, in Deut. 21:10-14, provision was made for possible situations in which a man might want to marry a non-Jewish woman from elsewhere. The issue seems not, then, to be racist but rather an issue of spiritual influence, "for they will turn your sons and daughters away from following me to serve other gods" (Deut. 7:4). We can only assume that such considerations were part of the investigations conducted under Ezra's authority, but the text does not explicitly say so.

We know from another source, Malachi, that a lot of Jewish men divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry foreign women (Mal. 2:10-16). Since Malachi's ministry may have been fairly near Ezra's time, that may have been part of the background for Ezra's action. Malachi may have come later, however.

Without knowing all the circumstances of Ezra's time and without knowing whether every foreign-born wife was dismissed in the same way, it is difficult for us to be judges of his policy. Even though it was based on God's law for Israel (and not for us), it may still be difficult for us to feel that this was the way Jesus would have handled the situation! So we may not feel good about the way Ezra and the other elders conducted this business, but let us at least observe the laudable aspects which can be applied by us today.

One lesson we can learn is this: If we want to see a restoration of God's full blessings in our lives and land, we will need to admit our errors. Like the people of Ezra's day, we will have to acknowledge our need for God's help and our need to make corrections. Attitudes and states of affairs which are contrary to the Bible will have to be identified, and we will have to do what we can to change those things.

Their actions at that time may seem too drastic to us, but at least give them credit for wanting to do right. Perhaps we would want to modify their actions in light of the gospel of Jesus. But the gospel does not mean that wrongdoing is excusable; it means there is a truly adequate and truly radical cure for wrongdoing for those who want to do right.

#### Possible discussion questions

1. How important was it for Ezra to have civil as well as spiritual authority? Is this a dangerous combination? (Compare the mullahs in present Iran.)
2. What qualities of Ezra do you like? dislike? Does that matter, when the issue is obedience to God's laws?
3. How does our reaction to the evils in our nation compare with Ezra's? Do you have to be a government official to take the lead in prayers of "identificational repentance"?
4. How would you have handled the problem presented to Ezra in 9:2?
5. God called Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (see Gen. 12:1-3). Does Ezra's action in ch. 10 help that blessing to happen, or does it hinder it by cutting off the Jews from the other nations? Does that raise an issue for our involvement in the world? How will we influence the world to believe in Jesus if we cut ourselves off from them? Or is marriage a different issue?



## EZRA-NEHEMIAH

### Lesson 4 Nehemiah 1-3

#### Introduction to Nehemiah

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are so closely related that at one time they were actually treated as one book. As we begin to read Nehemiah, however, it is obvious that this is a different narrator. Nehemiah, even more than Ezra, tells the story from a personal perspective. For that reason most readers find Nehemiah to be a more interesting book. We have not seen the last of Ezra, however; we will meet him again in Nehemiah 8.

Like Ezra, Nehemiah was sent to Jerusalem with official authority from the Persian Empire. Nehemiah, however, occupied a high position before he was sent to Judah. He was the cupbearer of Artaxerxes (although he does not tell us this until the end of ch. 1), which of course meant that he was entrusted with the safety of the king. The cupbearer was responsible to taste anything before the king drank it to prevent would-be assassins from attempting to poison the ruler. Oftentimes the cupbearer was much more than a trusted servant, he could be a confidant or official adviser. Nehemiah must have enjoyed significant status as adviser or administrator, for the king sends him to Judah as governor. It is not likely that he would have been given so much responsibility if all he had been doing before was handing the king his wine cup!

Nehemiah's primary accomplishment in Judah in a visible way was the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. It seems the city walls had never been restored since they were broken down in 587 by the Babylonians. We know that the Jews had started to rebuild but had been opposed and stopped (Ezra 4:12-23).

Nehemiah's response to the report of the city's sad condition (in ch. 1) has led some interpreters to think that the walls and gate had in fact been replaced at some time after the Babylonian captivity, only to have been again destroyed by Judah's enemies within the Persian Empire, i.e., the Samaritans. There is no clear evidence for that, however, and the straightforward reading of the available evidence suggests that the walls had remained in disrepair since 587. Whether Nehemiah wept over a more recent destruction of the city or over unrepaired damages more than a century old, we may not be able to say. In either case, his zealous sincerity in desiring, praying for, planning for, and working for the restoration of God's holy city is the important point.

#### Chapter 1

Nehemiah begins his narrative in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, which would be 445 B.C. The report about the condition of Jerusalem so distresses him that sits down and weeps. He enters into an extended time of mourning, praying, and fasting.

The recorded prayer (vss. 5-11) is remarkable as another example of "identificational repentance" (recall Ezra 9). Nehemiah confesses "the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed" against the LORD (vs. 6), the sins which caused the scattering of Israel and the present disgrace of Jerusalem (vs. 8). But he also calls to mind God's promise to restore his people if they return to his ways (vs. 9). He then asks God to grant him "favor in the presence of this man" (vs. 11). Which man? Nehemiah is referring to the king whom he serves as cupbearer. It becomes evident in the next chapter that Nehemiah was already thinking of asking Artaxerxes to intervene in Jerusalem's situation.

#### Chapter 2

As part of the background for Nehemiah's request to Artaxerxes, it is good to recall that this is the same king who had earlier ordered the Jews to stop such work (Ezra 4:7-23). He had stipulated that the work on the walls should stop "until I so order" (Ezra 4:21). That meant the

Jews could not proceed without his direct authorization, but it also left open the possibility that Artaxerxes was open to reconsider the situation at some future date. Still, Nehemiah's request was for nothing less than the reversal of the king's previous, written policy.

Nehemiah is careful to tell us the time of this important conversation with the king. The month of Nisan (vs. 1) would have been four months after Nehemiah first heard the distressing news about Jerusalem (Kislev, 1:1). Nehemiah has not been hasty in his actions. He has been praying about this situation for several months and obviously was still burdened for Jerusalem (2:2).

Was Nehemiah so preoccupied with his burden that he momentarily forgot that it was a serious breach of court etiquette for him to be sad in the presence of the king? (Unless of course the king was sad, then everyone was!) Or was this a deliberate move on Nehemiah's part--to allow his feelings to show in the hope that it might lead into the very kind of conversation which ensued? Either view is possible, but Nehemiah admits that he "was very much afraid" (vs. 2). It seems more likely that Nehemiah did not plan his sad face, but he did recognize the king's question as an opportunity to broach the subject which had been troubling him for months. Months of prayer about how to talk to the king about this had suddenly been answered--perhaps. It could also be that, if the king were offended by Nehemiah's impertinence, Nehemiah could lose his job and maybe a lot more! Nehemiah was right to be afraid. Eastern rulers of those times were not to be trifled with!

Nehemiah's words to the king begin with the appropriate courtesy: "May the king live forever!" Then Nehemiah then gets right to the point of why he is sad (vs. 3). His ancestral homeland (never Nehemiah's own home before this time) was in ruins. The king's next words to him seem to reflect Artaxerxes' genuine care for Nehemiah: "What is it you want?" (vs. 4)

Nehemiah first prays "to the God of heaven," then speaks to the mighty (but not almighty) king (vss. 4-6). Nehemiah's prayer has sometimes been called an 'arrow prayer'--a quick prayer fired off toward God in a moment of crisis. Truly it was, but Nehemiah's prayer life had been leading up to this moment for months.

It is obvious also that Nehemiah had already been thinking about what needed to happen in Jerusalem, and he had already decided that he would like to take part personally in the rebuilding project. Nehemiah had not simply been agonizing over the *problem*; he had been praying about and formulating a *solution*. When the king asked him what he wanted, Nehemiah was ready with a plan of action (vs. 5). He was even ready to answer the king's question about how long this should take (vs. 6). Nehemiah also knew what further assistance and authorizations would be required (vss. 7-8). Nehemiah had done his homework! He had counted the cost before he volunteered (compare Jesus' illustrations in Luke 14:28-33). Nehemiah gives himself no credit, however, for being a careful planner or a politically 'savvy' cupbearer. Rather he gives God the glory: "because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests" (vs. 8).

Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem, accompanied by official documents and cavalry, did not make everyone happy. Those who opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem, including Sanballat and Tobiah (vs. 10), were displeased to see another Jewish leader with government authority arrive to "promote the welfare of Israel." They proved to be stubborn and crafty foes.

Nehemiah shows great discretion in his initial days in Jerusalem (vss. 11-16). He tells no one what God has put in his heart to do, and he waits three days before he even surveys the city walls, which he does under cover of darkness. Why was he being so careful, even though he had authority from Artaxerxes himself?

Nehemiah knew he was going against the wishes of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, and of other influential men. Nehemiah knew from first-hand observation how people could seek to influence the decisions of the king. Nehemiah himself was absent from the royal court

now. If these opponents slandered him in the ears of Artaxerxes, who would defend him? Nehemiah knew he would be walking a tightrope throughout this entire process. He must exercise care, right from the very first steps.

After Nehemiah makes his own assessment of the work which needs to be done on the walls, he announces his intentions to the leaders of Jerusalem and informs them of his royal authority to carry out the plan. They respond immediately with willingness to engage in this worthy project, what Nehemiah likes to call "this good work" (vss. 17-18).

The expected opposition comes just as quickly. Sanballat and Tobiah are joined by Geshem in mocking and ridiculing the builders (vs. 19; more detail on this in 4:1-3). This tactic can be quite effective in discouraging people who already lack confidence. Nehemiah has an answer for them, however, for he has confidence in God: "the God of heaven will give us success" (vs. 20). Nehemiah's confidence would be very important in keeping his fellow Jews encouraged in the face of ridicule from the enemy.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem introduce a more sinister note into their ridicule when they ask, "Are you rebelling against the king?" This is ridicule, for it would be absurd to imagine that the Jews could successfully revolt against the powerful Persian Empire. At the same time, it is a threat that Nehemiah's opponents may carry such a charge to the ears of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah knows it is a threat, but he also knows he can and must trust God. He gives his word of testimony, and goes on to tell his opponents that this is really none of their business anyway!

### Chapter 3

This chapter shows us how Nehemiah organized the work of rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem. Even the high priest and other priests got involved in the construction work (vs. 1). Men from surrounding towns and villages came to contribute their labor (from Jericho, vs. 2; from Tekoa, vs. 5, although their nobles refused to work; from Gibeon and Mizpah, v. 7; from Zanoah, vs. 13). This chapter makes for tedious reading, but it was important for Nehemiah to give credit for the work of each group. Nehemiah's awareness of the details is noteworthy.

Possible discussion questions

1. What do you learn about Nehemiah's character from the way he first responded to the news about Jerusalem (ch. 1)? How does this compare with the way we usually respond to bad news?
2. Nehemiah was willing to pray but also to act. While we cannot act on every need about which we pray, do we need to be willing to act if God so leads? Name some examples from needs you know about.
3. Nehemiah was willing to act but also to pray. Do we ever get involved in projects or attempts to help people without adequate prayer-preparation? Ask for some examples of experiences in which people committed themselves to help and later regretted their hasty actions.
4. What can you learn about Nehemiah's prayer life simply by overhearing his conversation with Artaxerxes in ch. 2?
5. What relationship do you think there is between Nehemiah's prayer life and his response to his critics in 2:20?
6. The men of Judah seemed quite eager to help Nehemiah. Why had it taken so long for them to get started on this work? Could there be other reasons besides the opposition of the Samaritans? (Recall the earlier work on the temple, which was delayed although never forbidden--Lesson 2.)
7. Were all the people working on the wall professional construction workers? What were some of their occupations? Were they all men?
8. Are you making your contribution to the life and work of the church the way the people of Judah contributed to the building of the wall? If not, is there an identifiable reason why? Do you lack the opportunity or do you not feel encouraged to make a contribution (besides money!)?

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH

### Lesson 5

#### Nehemiah 4-6:14

#### Enemies Outside, Problems Inside

In this lesson we see just about the whole range of problems faced by Nehemiah and his fellow Jews at the time of trying to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The enemies of Judah tried a variety of tactics, but problems within Judah itself could not be postponed while dealing with those outside enemies.

#### Chapter 4

The opposition of Sanballat, governor of Samaria, has been mentioned before (1:10; 2:19). Now he is really angry, because the Jews have actually started rebuilding. His mocking attitude shows that he holds the Jewish people in utter contempt (vs. 2). Tobiah likewise regards those helping Nehemiah as worthy of his ridicule and disdain. These are not merely cynical critics, however. They have armed men at their disposal (vs. 2: "army of Samaria"), and as regional officials of the Persian Empire they wield real power and possible influence in the policy of the larger government. Their potential for disrupting Nehemiah's program is substantial.

The mockery of Judah's enemies includes mockery of their faith as well as their human resources. Sanballat asks, "Will they offer sacrifices?" (vs. 2). He means by this, "Do they imagine that God will help them? Ha!"

At this point, Nehemiah abruptly inserts one of his several recorded prayers (vss. 4-5). This particular prayer is of the type called "imprecatory" because it calls upon God to bring wrath upon one's human enemies. (Many of the Psalms contain such requests; one of the most vivid examples is Psa. 137.) This may seem like an un-christlike response, but at least Nehemiah was talking to God about Sanballat and Tobiah rather than just trading insults with them. Nehemiah obviously felt strongly about the importance of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls, and he felt just as strongly about those who ridiculed God's people in their efforts to do what was right. When he prays, "Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity," he is saying that these enemies deserve to be treated as Judah has been treated: "Let them see how it feels!"

Nehemiah reports that the work is progressing well as the people continue to work enthusiastically. The wall is half way up (vs. 6). This means that large gaps which had been in the wall for decades were being closed up. The Babylonians had not completely leveled the walls of old Jerusalem, but they had left a sufficient number of large gaps to render the city essentially defenseless. The task for Nehemiah and his work crews is to close those gaps and bring the wall up to a sufficient and uniform height all around the city. Notice that they work on all the gaps at the same time. It would do no good to close a few gaps completely while other gaps were left unrepaired. A single gap makes the whole city vulnerable. Being half way there in filling all the gaps is good news for the city but bad news for their enemies.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and others join together in a plot to attack Jerusalem in force (vss. 7-8). This indicates how deep their animosity toward Judah was, for they knew that such an attack was contrary to the expressed will of Artaxerxes, who had authorized Nehemiah's work. They probably figured that, if they successfully attacked Jerusalem, they could always tell Artaxerxes that they were really just defending his empire from the rebel Nehemiah. (See 6:6-7.)

Nehemiah's response, on hearing of this plot, is typical of his manner of life. "We prayed to our God and posted a guard" (vs. 9). Nehemiah is a man of prayer but also a man of action. He prays because he knows he cannot solve this problem without God's help, but he also does what he knows should be done by responsible human beings (cf. Psa. 127:1). Throughout this

book, Nehemiah demonstrates this balanced approach to challenges and threats.

All of the difficulties do not come from the enemies outside of Judah. The people of Judah start becoming discouraged (vs. 10). They have already done quite a lot in their first burst of energy, but they look up and see so much that still needs to be done, and it makes them more tired just to think about it!

Added to the piles of rubble they see are the frightening rumors they keep hearing (vss. 11-12). Their enemies were threatening a surprise attack. Now if you really want to surprise someone with an attack, you don't threaten them that you will do so--that would ruin the surprise! The enemies were saying this to dishearten them, and they were having some effect. Other Jews, living outside Jerusalem and nearer to the Samaritans and Ammonites, were helping to spread the talk of an impending attack (vs. 12). In their first report of the rumors to Nehemiah these Jews performed a valuable service, for Nehemiah and the other leaders needed to know this. By continually repeating the threats of the enemy, however, they were really helping the enemy's cause! Nehemiah sounds a bit exasperated when he says they "told us ten times over."

The combination of fatigue, discouragement, and fears fed by rumor was potent. Nehemiah had to respond to the new level of danger (not just from the enemy but now from the people's loss of heart) with some new tactics.

First, he immediately posts armed men behind those points in the wall which were the lowest, those places most obviously vulnerable to an enemy charge (vs. 13). Second, he surveys the situation again, no doubt looking for less obvious vulnerabilities and assessing how much still needs to be done (vs. 14). Then he speaks a word of encouragement to the other leaders and to the people in general. His exhortation in vs. 14 contains three main elements:

- (1) Don't be afraid of them.
- (2) Remember the LORD.
- (3) Fight for the sake of your families and homes.

Their response to (1) will be easier if they do (2). Also, if they do (2) they still need to be willing to do (3). Here again we see how balanced is Nehemiah's leadership. He keeps before his eyes and the eyes of the people the vision of "the LORD, who is great and awesome." This reminds them of their divine commission and the promise of divine assistance. Yet Nehemiah knows that divine assistance does not replace human effort; rather, it makes it possible in what would otherwise be impossible circumstances.

With immediate security needs attended to, the work on the wall resumes (vs. 15). From that point forward, however, maximum efficiency in working had to be sacrificed somewhat in the interests of safety (vss. 16-23). Half of the available manpower was devoted to guarding the other half, who continued the construction work. Surely the walls and gates could have been built faster if everyone had been able to concentrate on that. On the other hand, now those who were working on the wall did not need to be constantly glancing over their shoulders; they could work with greater concentration knowing that their Jewish brothers were on guard. Those who were carrying materials carried a sword in the free hand, and every builder also wore a sword on his side.

As a further security measure, Nehemiah required the workers to stay inside the rising walls at night, rather than return to their homes in the outlying villages. In this way, they could stand guard part of the night (vs. 22). They would also be more readily available if the alarm should sound while they were sleeping. Everyone, including Nehemiah, carried a weapon at all times and remained ready for combat at a moment's notice (vs. 23). Here again is a facet of Nehemiah's effective leadership: he shared in the hardship and vigilance that he required of others.

Because their work spread them out over the whole circumference of the walls, Nehemiah kept beside him a man with a trumpet, ready to sound the alarm and call the workers to drop the tools and come running with their spears and swords (vss. 18-20). When he instructs the people about this plan, he includes another word of encouragement: "Our God will fight for us!" Again, this obviously does not mean that God will fight so that we don't have to, but God will fight along with us to make our fight successful.

You have to admire Nehemiah's courage but also his ability to encourage his people. Because he is convinced of the godly cause, he is confident of God's help. But he has to communicate that confidence to others. Part of the way he communicates that confidence is by the sort of reminders he gives in vss. 14 and 20 about the presence of God to help them. But Nehemiah's careful attention to detail and prudent measures to provide such security as was humanly possible are also important elements in inspiring the confidence of those who are following his lead. This is the kind of leader who can be trusted; he is not reckless and inconsiderate of their safety. He does not shame them for being afraid; he gives them reasons not to be afraid.

## Chapter 5

As if Nehemiah did not have enough to think about, he had also to respond to internal problems and quarrels among the Jewish people. These problems were not superficial matters or merely petty arguments. Some people were finding it difficult to feed their families; others were losing their property and even their family members because of financial distress.

The wall-building project had certainly diverted some manpower from agriculture to construction and guarding. This diversion of workers had perhaps aggravated the poverty already existing in Judah. Since the building project took a total of only 52 days, however (6:15), the project's demands on manpower could not have created the situation being complained about in 5:2. There was already a shortage of food.

The people in vs. 2 are asking for assistance. The people in vs. 3 are voicing their fear of losing their property because of the measures they are having to take just to get enough food. The people in vss. 4-5 seem to be eating, but the tax burden is jeopardizing their futures and their families. They lament the fact that they have had to allow their sons and daughters to go into servitude to pay for their debts, and they have no property to give in exchange for their freedom. What makes Nehemiah really angry is that some of this distress is being caused or exploited by some of the Jews' treatment of fellow Jews.

Nehemiah's first reaction is anger, but, as he typically does, Nehemiah thinks it through and then takes action (vss. 6-11). He calls a meeting to deal with the issue publicly. In effect, he accuses some of his countrymen of acting like "loan-sharks" instead of brothers in the faith. The taking of interest on a loan to a fellow Jew was not supposed to happen (see Deut. 23:19-20, which permits interest in loans to non-Israelites).

Since they really have no excuse (vs. 8), the people agree that Nehemiah is right and promise to set matters right (vs. 12). Nehemiah is not content to drop the matter just because they have agreed. He brings in the priests and requires an oath from the nobles and officials that they will carry out their promise, and he further invokes a curse on those who fail to keep their word in this matter (vss. 11-12). Nehemiah reports that they did, in fact, keep their promise (vs. 13).

Verses 14-19 summarize Nehemiah's conduct with regard to the financial and material resources at his disposal, not just at the time of the rebuilding project but throughout his tenure as governor (twelve years, vs. 14). He voluntarily chose not to use all the official "perks" at his disposal, because to do so would have increased the tax burden on his fellow Jews. Nehemiah

had not come to Jerusalem to get rich (vs. 16) or to have an easy life; in the truest sense of the word, he was a public servant. Especially since the nation was struggling financially at the time, he was motivated by compassion (vs. 18). Another motivation he specifically mentions is his "reverence for God" (vs. 15). He knows that he will be accountable to God for how he treats people (vs. 19) more surely than he will have to justify his books to the Persian government.

#### Chapter 6, verses 1-14

This chapter is interesting for the variety of attempts made to hinder or stop Nehemiah-- and all of this during 52 days of construction work on the walls! First Sanballat and Geshem attempt to lure Nehemiah into a trap. Their invitation appears more subtle when you remember that their request for a meeting is coming from fellow governors!

The meeting they ask for (vs. 2) would have required more than a day's journey for Nehemiah, to some place roughly halfway between Samaria and Jerusalem. Of course Nehemiah was no fool; he knew there was malice in the invitation. Based on previous threats, Sanballat and Geshem could be assumed to be planning to take him prisoner or maybe even kill him. Even if it could be assumed that they meant no harm to him personally, Nehemiah could justifiably say, "I'm too busy, and this project cannot be delayed just to meet with you" (vs. 3).

Sanballat and Geshem are persistent! Four times they send a request for a meeting (vs. 4). Nehemiah refuses to bend, and he refuses to be worn down by the enemy's persistence. The fifth invitation is an outright threat to slander Nehemiah before the king. It is also delivered in such a way as to maximize its negative effect on the people under Nehemiah's leadership.

Sanballat sent the message in an unsealed letter (vs. 5). This was practically the equivalent of writing someone an "open letter" which is published in the newspaper. The purpose is publicity, in this case to fuel the rumors in Judah that Nehemiah is under investigation by the government for planning a rebellion! Nehemiah's reply is brusque: No such thing is happening. You are just making up lies about me (vs. 8). Nehemiah inserts another reference to his prayer response to the threat. It's interesting that he does not ask for protection but for strengthening (vs. 9). His focus is on the divinely given task, not the enemy's attack.

Verses 10-14 report yet another tactic of Nehemiah's opponents. They hire a "prophet" (i.e., someone with the reputation for being a prophet) to speak lies to Nehemiah. When Shemaiah tells Nehemiah that "men are coming to kill you" and that he should retreat to the safety of the temple (vs. 10), he sounds like he is on Nehemiah's side. But Nehemiah recognizes this warning (spoken as though it were a prophecy, vs. 12) as an attempt to make him appear fearful for his life. This was a very subtle ploy, in spiritual disguise, to undermine the people's confidence in Nehemiah. If the leader panics, the people will. God gave Nehemiah discernment in the situation to avoid falling for this deception.

Nehemiah says that he would have committed a "sin" if he had allowed himself to be intimidated into hiding in the temple (vs. 13). Probably he means that, since he is not a priest, he would be violating God's law by going into the sanctuary. Possibly he also means he would be sinning to allow fear for his own safety to keep him from doing what God had told him to do.

His response to this threat for his personal safety is interesting also in comparison with the way he responded to the earlier threats of attack against the building crews. Nehemiah took reasonable precautions, especially when he was responsible for the safety of others (ch. 4), but he did not let threats keep the work from proceeding.

Without giving us any details, Nehemiah mentions other prophets and a prophetess, Noadiah, who in some way also tried to intimidate him. Whether these were obviously wicked people we can only speculate, but opponents who cloak their opposition in "thus says the Lord," or "God told me to tell you," or words such as "I've prayed about this, and here's what I feel in



my heart/spirit" often appear quite "spiritual" and may have a reputation for being godly. They may even be good people who don't recognize that they are being used. Discernment of their motive or the truth of their message is often not easy.

To avoid the subtle trap which they set (sometimes even without being conscious they are doing it), we have to have a clear vision from God for ourselves. Otherwise we will not have the courage to say, "That's not from God." To have such a clear vision, we will have to conduct our lives with consistent submission to the known will of God, and with continuing attention to his word. Someone who has learned to recognize God's voice is in the best position to recognize a counterfeit. Even the experienced and steady Christian, however, will also have to rely on the mercy of God to grant discernment whenever the enemy's disguise is especially subtle (see 2 Cor. 11:14-15).

(Here is one helpful principle in evaluating "personal prophecies," prophetic messages which claim to give guidance for your life: such a prophetic word can confirm what God has already been saying to you, or it can be confirmed by further prayer, study, and counsel, but it should not be relied on as a primary or solitary source of guidance. Anyone who embarks on a course of action only because someone else said "thus says the Lord" is vulnerable to serious deception and possible disaster. The character and "track record" of the prophet are valuable considerations in evaluating prophecies, but by themselves are not sufficient for making the prophet's word a foundation for important decisions.)

Possible discussion questions

1. Have you ever let ridicule (or the fear of ridicule) keep you from obeying God? Do Christians in general seem intimidated in our society?
2. How much of a threat is it to our enemy (Satan) when we work for the Lord with all our heart (4:6)? Can you work with all your heart if you are worried about your reputation in the eyes of others?
3. Would you describe Nehemiah as "unintimidated" or as "defiant"? Is there a difference between those two descriptions?
4. Opposition from outside and dissension within tend to have different effects on groups. Name some differences.
5. What was causing the dissension within Judah at this time? What kind of motives needed to be kept in check? How did the motives of some leaders in Judah compare with Nehemiah's?
6. In light of the attempts to intimidate or deceive Nehemiah in ch. 6, can we now see even more how important his prayer preparation was in ch. 1?
7. Do you have an understanding of God's will for you that is clear enough to keep you from being steered off course by "spiritual" advice?

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH

### Lesson 6

#### Nehemiah 6:15-8:18

#### Rebuilding a Wall, Rebuilding a People

Nehemiah has given us a fair amount of detail about the opposition he encountered in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. So much happened in chapters 3-6, but the project took less than two months. Given the powerful, influential, and persistent opposition we saw in the previous lesson, it is easy to see why Nehemiah wanted to complete the task as quickly as possible, before his opponents could find a way to stop him legally or otherwise. In this lesson, we read about the completion of the wall, and we see Nehemiah and Ezra quickly move on to other kinds of rebuilding.

#### Completion of the Walls (6:15-7:3)

Despite all the opposition from outside and the difficulties within Judah itself, they had finished the rebuilding of the walls and the gates in only 52 days (6:15). Because the Jews, under Nehemiah's courageous and wise leadership, had endured the season when their enemies tried to dishearten them, they got to see the tables turned. Their enemies were now the disheartened ones, for they saw that the Jewish workers had been successful. Jerusalem was no longer the vulnerable, defenseless city which could be easily plundered or intimidated, and even the enemies of Judah had to acknowledge that God must have helped them (vs. 16).

At this point, Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and others might have wished they had not made such an issue of Jerusalem's walls. If they had not made the project such a focus of their efforts, they would not have looked quite so defeated. By their persistent opposition and attempts to distract the Jews, these men had actually enhanced the image of the Jews in the area, for clearly the Jews had shown remarkable resolve and concentration in the face of great difficulties. (Someone who runs down a deserted football field is not nearly so impressive as someone who evades determined tacklers to do it!)

So that's the end of the opposition, right? Not exactly. The enemies have suffered a major setback, but the fight goes on, simply on different fronts and over different issues. One of the key figures in the opposition to the wall, Tobiah the Ammonite (see 4:3, 7-8; 6:1, 14), has strong family connections and a significant party of supporters among the "nobles" of Judah. They keep him informed of everything Nehemiah says and does, and they also keep telling Nehemiah what a great guy Tobiah is (6:17-19). We can imagine how irritating Nehemiah found these unsolicited reports on the "good deeds" of Tobiah, the same man who was sending "letters to intimidate me" (vs. 19).

With the walls and gates complete, Nehemiah took care of some other administrative work: appointments of gatekeepers, singers, and Levites (7:1). Some of these may have routine matters, or the filling of positions which had gone unfilled while life in Jerusalem languished. The position of gatekeeper could have gone unfilled for more than a century! From 587 to 445 there was no gate to open and close.

For positions of the greatest responsibility, he made sure to appoint men whose integrity he trusted, Hanani and Hananiah (7:2; on Hanani, recall 1:2). His careful instructions about the opening and shutting of the gates, as well as about the posting of guards in other places, indicate that there is still reason for vigilance. The divided loyalties referred to in 6:17-19 would be reason enough for Nehemiah to be very careful about whom to trust with the city gates.

The note about the available space in the city (7:4) previews a measure that will be taken later in the attempt to populate the city more fully (see 11:1). The fact that many houses were still in ruins (from the Babylonian destruction in 587) is yet another indicator how deeply and

how long Jerusalem had been in dire straits. This should sharpen our picture of the challenge which faced Nehemiah in rebuilding the walls. In view of the small population in Jerusalem and perhaps in anticipation of the action taken in 11:1, Nehemiah declares that "God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration" (7:5). With the city walls restored, there is a need to get organized about which property belongs to which family. This assembling of the people will in turn lead to other opportunities for renewing national life, beginning in chapter 8. (The rest of this chapter, 7:6-73, repeats the material in Ezra 2.)

#### Chapter 8: The Reading of the Law and the People's Response

In Nehemiah we have mostly been reading about the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. This chapter, in contrast, is about the renewal of the people through giving attention and obedience to God's Word. What is not apparent to the casual reader is how closely this chapter's events follow the building project.

The first day of the seventh month (8:2) is actually only a few days after the completion of the walls on "the twenty-fifth of Elul," the sixth month of their year (6:15). Later there will be a celebration of the dedication of the walls (ch. 12), but right now there is some other "rebuilding" needed first: renewal of the people's knowledge of God's Word.

At this point we meet Ezra again. He has been present in Jerusalem since 458 B.C., and it is now 445. No doubt he has been teaching God's word throughout that time to all who would listen, but the rebuilding of the wall provides an occasion for a real push toward spiritual renewal. Turning point events in the life of a nation, a family, or an individual life can be such opportunities for fresh starts or renewed commitments.

The description of the setting is interesting. The location was a large public square in the city (vs. 1). The audience contained men, women, "and all who were able to understand," i.e., those children old enough (vs. 2). Ezra read while standing high above the people on "a high wooden platform built for the occasion" (vs. 4). He read from daybreak until noon (vs. 3), perhaps five or six hours! Since several other men were also on the platform, it may be that they took turns reading portions which Ezra had previously selected.

To show reverence for the Word of God, the people stood up while it was being read (vs. 5). Verse 6 goes on to tell about the response to the reading. "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."

Verses 7 and 8 provide still more detail about what was actually happening on this day of instruction. Apparently Ezra (and perhaps the other men on the platform) would read a passage from the Law. Then a team of Levites scattered throughout the great congregation would provide instruction based on the reading (vs. 7). Their task was "making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (vs. 8). Perhaps this included answering questions from the people.

This task of explaining and interpreting probably involved at least some translation from the Hebrew text of the Bible to the Aramaic language now serving as the everyday language not only of Judah but of that entire region. The two languages are quite similar but different enough to require translation so that important points would not be misunderstood. Notice that this chapter in Nehemiah puts a lot of emphasis on the importance of understanding (see vs. 2, 3, 7, 8, 12, 13). Merely hearing the sounds of the Word being read is not enough. (One of the great contributions of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's was insisting that people need to have the Bible in their own language.)

As the people listened attentively to the reading and explaining of the Scriptures, they must have become convinced of many ways that their lives (personally and as a nation) fell short of God's revealed will. Many began to weep. It's almost surprising to hear the austere and disciplined Ezra and Nehemiah tell them to stop weeping (vs. 9). But this was not to be a day of mourning. This was to be a day of rejoicing and giving thanks for the national renewal that was occurring.

Nehemiah is not saying that mourning and weeping are never appropriate when he says, "Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (vs. 10). He knows that there is a time for praying with mourning and fasting (1:4); he knows that there is also a time for praising with rejoicing and feasting. (Eccles. 3:4--"a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.")

In fact, we can safely say that Nehemiah has come to this day of rejoicing and can fully enter into it *because* he did not draw back from those earlier days of mourning and weeping. Those whose repentance and submission to God's will have been deepest will have the deepest, most abiding joy. Others, who are content with superficial expressions of repentance, will have only superficial joy.

The feast of this day was first of all a feast of God's Word--hours of reading, explaining, and absorbing the Scriptures! Ezra and Nehemiah say that an appropriate way to celebrate that feast is to have a feast of physical food and to share the bounty with others who lack (vs. 10). With Nehemiah, Ezra, and other Levites persuading them, the people leave and spend the second half of the day feasting and celebrating "with great joy, because they now understood the words" of the Law (vs. 12).

On the following day, the study of Scripture continues, but this time only with the heads of the families and the priests and Levites in attendance (vss. 13ff.; compare vs. 2). This was probably for the purpose of giving particular instruction to those who had responsibility for teaching the Law of God to others, including their families. It was also at this time that the instructions about observing the Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles) were discussed. It was almost the time of the year when this should be observed (the fifteenth day of the seventh month).

The Feast of Booths/Tabernacles had been commanded by the LORD as a way to commemorate each year the time that Israel had spent in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, when they had lived in tents as nomads (Lev. 23:39-43). This was a way of remembering not only the way God had provided for Israel during that period but also of remembering that the houses and lands of Palestine, which later generations enjoyed, were God's gifts. The recent renewal of Jerusalem's walls and the renewal of the people's knowledge that they were God's chosen nation (witnessed by the Law) was a good time to celebrate with new zeal God's provision of the holy land. In a very real sense, Judah had now come through a second Exodus. (Recall also Ezra 3:4, which refers to the first celebration of Tabernacles after the return from Babylonian Exile in 538, almost 100 years before this date in Nehemiah's life.)

The Feast of Tabernacles had been celebrated before, but not since the days of Joshua had it been so fully observed and so meaningful (vs. 17). Throughout the continuation of the Feast, Ezra continued to teach the people from God's Word.

It is an item for curiosity to note that nothing is said here about the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which would come on the tenth day of the seventh month, that is, after the teaching session in the first part of this chapter and before the Feast of Tabernacles in the last part. One possible explanation for this is that Nehemiah wanted to emphasize the teaching of God's Word as the most important element in the national renewal.

Possible discussion questions

1. Have you ever been in a situation where the people had divided loyalties which undermined the effectiveness of leadership? Is there a good way to resolve such conflicts?

2. How did the people of Judah show their reverence for the Word of God? How do we do this today?

3. Have you ever wept over what you have read in the Bible? Have you ever laughed for sheer joy? Have you shown more emotion over your favorite team winning a big game than you have over the love of God?

4. Why is it important to celebrate spiritually significant events of the past? Besides those days celebrated by most or all Christians (such as Christmas and Easter), do you have any spiritual anniversaries that you commemorate?

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH

### Lesson 7 Nehemiah 9-10

#### Confession, Repentance, and Resolution

In this lesson, we get into the real substance of the religious reform and revival which followed the rebuilding of the city walls. In last week's lesson, the people were told not to weep when they heard God's Word. In this week's lesson we see what real repentance looks like-- specific confession of how we fall short of God's will and specific changes in the way we live.

#### Chapter 9

The Feast of Booths (ch. 8) began on the fifteenth and ended on the twenty-second day of the seventh month. That was a time of feasting. Two days later (9:1), the people who had remained after the feast began to participate in a fast, while wearing the traditional sackcloth and putting dust on their heads as a vivid sign of self-abasement (vs. 1). Earlier the Levites, following the lead of Ezra and Nehemiah, had encouraged the people not to weep or mourn (8:9). Now they take the lead in mourning and confessing the sins of Israel (9:5-37). Was this fast on the "church calendar" like the feast which had just concluded?

Actually this fast was not on the religious calendar (earlier that month, on the 10th, the Day of Atonement had already occurred). This seems more to be a genuine response to the extended Bible-teaching which had occurred throughout the whole month up to this point (including the daily teaching during the Feast of Booths, 8:18). The teaching had been given a chance to soak in, and now a season of deep contrition was appropriate (unlike the initial response to that first day of teaching, 8:9).

The separation "from all foreigners" (vs. 2) was an issue that Ezra had dealt with earlier (in a very stern way, Ezra 9-10), but the problem persists throughout the book of Nehemiah (see also the next lesson). The number of mixed marriages were just one indicator of the inconsistency of the people in obeying God's Law, but it was an important matter because, potentially at least, it involved all the temptations of worshiping foreign gods and of losing their identity as God's chosen people, set apart from other nations (see Lev. 20:26).

The people stood for the reading of the Law (vs. 3; cf. 8:5) for one quarter of the day, three hours! We might safely assume that there was again some work done by the Levites in explaining what was being heard (as in 8:7-8). Then they spent another three hours "in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God" (vs. 3). We have no details on how they used this time. Some of the time may have been for corporate use of penitential psalms; some time may have been devoted to individual prayer. The essence of that day's corporate confession and worship is presented to us in the remarkable prayer which fills the rest of this chapter, beginning with vs. 5. Several characteristics of this prayer are worthy of notice.

First of all, the prayer expresses a profound understanding of God as both the Creator and Redeemer. God's role as the eternal Creator of everything is acknowledged in vss. 5-6. Then, from vs. 7 on, the prayer recites the highlights of God's activity in the history of salvation, beginning with the call of Abram and God's covenant promises to him and his descendants. The mighty deliverance from Egypt and the giving of the Law are recalled (vss. 9-15). Along with remembering the rebellious acts of Israel's ancestors, the prayer acknowledges the grace and forgiveness of God on repeated occasions in the past and his mercy in preserving a remnant as at the present time (vss. 16-17, 26-27, 28, 31).

In addressing God as both Creator and Redeemer, this prayer reflects the biblical view of God, unique in the ancient world but found in many Old and New Testament passages (some examples: Isa. 42:5-7; 43:1, 14-15; 44:24; 65:17; John 1:1-3, 14; Col. 1:15-20, Rev. 4:11; 5:12).

The Bible constantly teaches us to believe that Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, is also guiding earth's history (and our own personal history) according to his purpose, which will ultimately manifest his eternal glory as our Savior. If we take this understanding of God and the nature of history for granted, it shows how much our view of God has been shaped by the Bible and by the historic Jewish and Christian experience. (Compare other religions, such as Hinduism or Buddhism, in which "salvation" would be escape *from* history, rather than the purpose of God's acts *in* history.)

There are many significant implications in believing that our God is both the Creator of heaven and earth and the Redeemer of our lives (our histories). One implication is that the full scope of his power to create is available for his saving purposes. How much power is that? Also the full scope of his interest in what he created is the scope of his interest in redemption. How much does he care? We would not exist, nor would our universe, if he did not care! God's roles as Creator and Redeemer really come to sharp focus in the biblical picture of "the new heaven and new earth." The perfection of redemption is the complete renewal of all creation (Isa. 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1, 5).

A second notable feature of this prayer is that it contains worship and praise along with the confession of sins. This is instructive because often today people speak of "praise and worship" as though it had nothing to do with confession of sins, as though praise always has to be upbeat and stay away from negatives. Indeed, confession of sins is given very little thought by many who participate in "worship." This great prayer in ch. 9 combines exalted words of worship and praise (for who God is and what he has done) with admission of persistent sin by the nation. Apparently the acknowledgement of God (the most basic ingredient of worship) and the acknowledgement of our need for his salvation are not incompatible.

The prayer begins with the exhortation to the people to "stand up and praise the LORD your God" (NIV; NRSV has "bless the LORD"), and then addresses God with the words "Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD" (vss. 5-6). After God's name is blessed and he is praised for having created everything, the prayer acknowledges God as the one who chose Abraham and made a covenant with him. The compassion and power of God in delivering Israel from Egypt are recounted (vss. 9-12), and the giving of the Law at Sinai and God's continuous, miraculous provision for the people in the wilderness (vss. 13-15).

Suddenly this litany of praise is interrupted by these words, "But they, our forefathers, became arrogant . . ." (vs. 16). This prayer is not just reciting God's goodness in the past, although it certainly does that. As you read through the entire prayer, you find repeated confessions of Israel's sins in the past, followed by remembrance of God's grace in dealing with them. (See "but" in vss. 17, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 36; also "yet" in vs. 30. If you are using a different translation, the wording will vary. You may find words such as "nevertheless.") Repeatedly, down through the generations, Israel had sinned, had gone through trouble as a result, had called out to God for help, and God had delivered them "time after time" (vs. 28).

When looked at in its entirety, this prayer is mostly about the pattern of Israel's unfaithfulness and God's faithfulness as those patterns affect the present situation of God's people. Thus, when they confess the sins of their ancestors, they are admitting why they are in their current state as a people--not that it is a simple matter of the ancestors sinning and the descendants reaping the consequences; rather that the sins of the ancestors have been repeated throughout the generations, including the present one. The present generation has inherited sinful ways. To confess those sins of the past is to confess their own heritage. Israel has to confess to God that "in all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong" (vs. 33). The "we" in that confession is not merely a reference to the

people alive and present at the time of this prayer. "We" means "we as a people" throughout all these generations--we have been unfaithful while God has been faithful.

Confessing the sins of our ancestors is not something that comes easily to us. (Not that it has ever been something which people enjoyed, but we are far more individualistic than the people of the ancient Near East.) In one sense, of course, we are not responsible for the sins committed by our parents, grandparents, etc. But to the extent that we have inherited human ways of thinking and behaving and relating to others, we have inherited the sinful ways as much as the good ways. It is only honest to recognize this, and to repent of our participation in perpetuating sinful ways.

Possibly it will help us to think about this by remembering a famous "we" in our nation's heritage. Our Constitution begins with the words: "We the people of the United States of America." That "we" is not just the people who wrote and signed the document on which our union and system of government are based. That "we" is not just a bunch of men who died a couple of centuries ago. That "we" is us! Not because we physically wrote the document but because the document defines who we are as a nation. Even before we were old enough to appreciate the facts or the values reflected in the Constitution, those values and principles were shaping our lives. We were benefiting from them. Our understanding of who we are and what we are about as a nation was at every point, from the very beginning of our lives as Americans, molded by what "we" wrote in the Constitution, because we identified with the "we" who did write and ratify it. In a real sense the framers of our nation's Constitution gave us our definition and identity as a people. We were born into this nation (or moved here), but at some point we accepted this definition of who "we" are. *We* ratified what "we" had written 200 years ago.

Someone who never studied American history or government but who lived here in America would still enjoy the benefits of the Constitution. But for such a person truly to understand and appreciate the nation's system of government and the rights we hold dear, that person would have to learn something about what "we" means in the document that begins with "we the people."

That is the kind of understanding Israel was coming to in Nehemiah's day. This great confession--of God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness--is not that generation saying that they had personally committed all those sins which their ancestors had committed. But it is that generation saying, "We are that nation, which has repeatedly sinned over the generations and which, at the present, is in dire straits, only a pale reflection of what God really wants us to be. We are that nation, greatly blessed by God yet we have betrayed our unique heritage so often that only God's patience and mercy can explain why we have not vanished from the face of the earth. This is who we are; may God have mercy on us!"

Earlier in this series we have noted that Ezra and Nehemiah (and other OT prophets) were willing to pray prayers of "identificational repentance" (Lessons 3 and 4). Even when they were not personally guilty of the sins committed by other people, they were willing to identify with those people as their own people, and to pray for God's mercy on them as though they were asking that mercy for themselves. Ezra and Nehemiah understood that they were part of the people who needed God's forgiveness, and they did not stand aloof and regard themselves as untouched or uninvolved in the plight of their people. Do we pray that way for our nation or for our cities? Should we? Would we want Jesus to pray for us that way? Would we want him to intercede for us that way? Are we willing to be prayed for that way? Are we willing to pray that way?

The people of Judah who joined Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites in prayer that day had to admit that "we are slaves today" (to the Persian Empire) and "we are in great distress" (vss. 36-37). This is an acknowledgement of their need for God's help, but the admission of need is



attached to the admission of involvement in the guilt of their nation: "because of our sins" (vs. 37). Acknowledging need for help from God is connected with acknowledging responsibility for what we have done, what we have participated in. These acknowledgements are also found in the model prayer taught us by Jesus: "Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The use of the plural--"us . . . our . . . we"--is significant. We cannot acknowledge the full extent of individual needs or trespasses unless we acknowledge that our needs and trespasses are interconnected with those of other human beings. If I'm really going to pray for *me*, I'm going to have to pray for *us*.

There are many other items in this long prayer which could be discussed. Let me just mention a few others briefly. Note that God's goodness to Israel was the same after the people's sin as it was before. Compare vs. 15 and vs. 20, both of which refer to God's provision of food and water while Israel was in the wilderness. Israel suffered the chastisement of God for these episodes of disobedience, but he "did not abandon them" (vs. 19). Some events happened as results of their sins--events which could have been avoided--and Israel's situation was changed by these events. Israel's political, economic, and military situations could be changed, and were changed many times, but God's faithfulness to his covenant purposes never changed (vs. 33).

One final observation on this prayer (out of many possible items) concerns the importance of recalling past acts of God's deliverance and forgiveness. Such recall was needed for the sake of the present hope of the people. Judah's situation at the time of Nehemiah was one of "great distress" (vs. 37), but the prayer has reminded everyone there that this is not the first time that Israel has called out to God in great distress, and God has answered with deliverance (vss. 27-29). Hope can be encouraged by rehearsing this history. Embarrassing as it is to remember that we have been so often in need of deliverance, it is vital to remember how God has delivered us in the past so that we may have courage and hope in the present. Our past *experiences of salvation* shape our present and future *expectations of salvation*. That's just one reason why it is important to remember the stories and to tell the stories of what God has done in the past, what God has brought us through, etc. If we forget where we have been, we will lack courage and direction for where we need to go.

## Chapter 10

Actually the last verse of ch. 9 is both the natural continuation of the lengthy prayer of confession and the introduction to the first part of ch. 10. The binding agreement or covenant which is described in ch. 10 is intended to address the problems confessed in the prayer of ch. 9. One mark of true repentance is that more than mourning takes place: real substantive change is made, and people go on record in their commitment to God and to one another.

This agreement is signed first of all by Nehemiah, the appointed governor. Ezra's name does not appear here, apparently because the head of his family, Seraiah, signed as the representative of the whole family (vs. 2; see also Ezra 7:1). If each name represents a family and not just an individual, this list represents a fairly large number of people, although it would be impossible to say how many. All of the names appearing in vss. 1-27 were leaders in some capacity: Nehemiah (the governor); the men in vss. 1-8 were priests (descendants of Aaron); Levites are listed in vss. 9-13; and then other "leaders of the people" (vss. 14-27). Presumably then, these names represent even more than their families; they represent various spheres of influence and responsibility. Their signatures speak for their personal commitments, their families' commitments, and their intentions to lead others within their spheres of influence.

In addition to the formal signatories, "the rest of the people," including the wives and the children "who are able to understand," affirm the oath of loyalty to the Law of God. They even invoke a curse on themselves if they fail to abide by it (vss. 28-29). There was, in fact, already a

curse pronounced long ago on any in Israel who did not abide by God's laws; the words here agree with that earlier pronouncement (see Deut. 28:15-68). This oath is actually a renewal of commitment to the whole Law, but the specific things named in the pledge reflect the issues which were most in need of attention at this stage in their history.

Intermarriage with "the peoples around us" was the first specific thing agreed to (vs. 30). Ezra had already dealt with this (Ezra 9-10, lesson 3), and Nehemiah will deal with it yet again (in ch. 13, lesson 8). Listing this part of the pledge first indicates that it was perhaps the most crucial issue at the time.

A pledge to observe the Sabbath, not only in letter but in spirit, is the next item (vs. 31). Apparently some Jews had been taking advantage of the availability of Gentile merchants on the Sabbath. Henceforth, they agreed not to do this. Also in vs. 31 is a pledge to give the land its prescribed sabbath every seventh year, which was also the time to cancel any debts which might be owed among the people of Judah (Deut. 15:1).

The rest of the oath (vss. 32-39) pertains to the needed support of the ongoing ministry at the temple. It is instructive that the oath devotes so much space to these various specific ways of supporting the priests and supplying the physical necessities for the temple worship. As seen in the post-exilic prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, as well as in the history we have studied in Ezra and Nehemiah, support for the temple and the priestly ministry was not a high priority for many of the Jews who had returned from Babylonian Captivity. God's spokesmen--priests and prophets--had to exhort the people on this matter repeatedly. The concluding words of the oath, "We will not neglect the house of our God" (vs. 39), summarize the commitment of the people to rearrange their commitments on this point.

Possible discussion questions

1. Should we confess the sins of our ancestors as well as our own? If we were to confess those sins, what kinds of things would they be?
2. Can you confess the sins of others while interceding for them? Does that do any good at all?
3. Can Christians praying together at church confess the sins of our nation or our community?
4. Should we forget what has been forgiven in the past? Are there times to forget and times to remember?
5. Would you be willing to go on public record, to sign your name to a commitment to live according to God's Word, including a pledge to do your part to support the ministry of the church? (You actually have done so, verbally, if you have joined the church!)
6. How important is it to make specific commitments to express our loyalty to God? How important is it to be accountable to another human being in how we live up to these commitments?
7. Do such commitments to tangible acts of obedience have anything to do with what we really are spiritually?

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH

### Lesson 8

#### Nehemiah 11-13

#### Celebration and Continuing Challenges

In this final lesson of the series, we will read about the climactic celebration for the dedication of Jerusalem's rebuilt wall (ch. 12). In that regard, the book of Nehemiah reaches a satisfying conclusion--the completion of the vital project which occupied so much attention and attracted such opposition. But we will also find that the book ends with other challenges unresolved--even to the point that it looks as though the people are slipping backwards rather than moving forward. In some respects, Nehemiah's work remained unfinished. Because of the very nature of humanity, the task of reformation and spiritual renewal is never completed (in this lifetime, at least).

#### 11:1--12:26

Chapter 11 and the first half of ch. 12 need not detain us for long, since much of this section is devoted to a listing of names. First there is a listing of those who settled in Jerusalem. As noted earlier (7:4), the city was under-populated. Even after the walls were restored, there was much work that remained to do inside the walls to clean up and rebuild the rest of the city.

In addition to the leaders who settled in Jerusalem and some volunteers who moved there, others in Judah were selected by lot (one out of every ten) to move to the capital. It was vital for the nation's continued recovery to have a strong center, especially because the temple was in Jerusalem. From there spiritual and moral influence--whether strong or weak, good or evil--would flow out to the rest of Judah.

The remainder of ch. 11 records for us where other families settled. Then 12:1-26 records the names of Levites and priests in Judah. This is important for historical purposes but not for our purposes in this present study.

#### 12:27-47: Dedicating the Wall

Nehemiah does not tell us exactly when this dedication service for the rebuilt wall took place. From the size and complexity of the service it is easy to imagine that it took some time just to organize and prepare for it. From the book of Nehemiah itself we know that the Feast of Booths had occurred since the construction was finished, and that had been followed by the repentance and covenant renewal about which we studied in the previous lesson. Presumably, then, this ceremony of celebration and dedication took place not too long afterwards.

The description of the celebration is notable for the amount of attention Nehemiah gives to it, and for the details provided. This was obviously an important day in Nehemiah's view. The ceremony provided an opportunity to dedicate the wall but also to praise God once again for restoring the nation thus far and for renewing their hope as they renewed their commitment to live faithfully as his people.

Levites and singers, from Jerusalem and from elsewhere in the region, provided the music and leadership in the praise (vss. 27-29). (Recall also 7:1, where Nehemiah had appointed singers and Levites right after the wall was completed. They probably started rehearsing right away!) Verse 30 mentions that the Levites and priests first purified themselves ceremonially, then they purified the people, then the gates and the wall. The order is significant.

An impure priesthood could not purify the people, nor could an impure people make the walls and gates holy unto the LORD. First, the priests and Levites have to be sure of their own right relationship to God and his instructions for their appointed role. They cannot rightly fill the

role without being right in their personal lives. The history of God's people is marked repeatedly with examples which warn us not to presume to speak or act in God's name without humbly submitting ourselves to him. The only priest who did not need to get right with God before he offered sacrifices for others was Jesus (see Heb. 7:26-28). Once the priests had submitted to the disciplines and sacrifices for their own purification, they could lead the people to do the same. Then priests and people together could offer to God the work of their hands (the gates and the walls) for his blessing.

Even though we do not depend on the mediation of human priests (because we can have a direct relationship with God in Jesus through the presence of the Holy Spirit), we still have to follow the order that these Levites and priests did in Nehemiah's day. We cannot neglect our personal holiness and devotion to God and expect him to be pleased with the things we offer him. No other sacrifices can be truly acceptable to God if we do not offer him ourselves, even our "bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God," which is our "spiritual act of worship" (Rom. 12:1). The person who offers himself/herself to God can then offer acts of service or sacrificial gifts pleasing to God and blessed by God. The person whose own life is in harmony with God can be used by God to bring his peace to others.

The procession of the divided choirs, walking in opposite directions along the top of the wall until they eventually met together in the temple, must have been impressive (vss. 31-43). They would not have had bulletins to hand out to everyone, but Nehemiah has recorded for us the names of all those who had special parts on that day. He mentions that Ezra led one half of the divided procession (vs. 36) while Nehemiah went with the other half (vs. 38). He names certain ones whose contribution was to play their musical instruments (vss. 36, 41). Among the many names, he also tells us that Jezrahiah directed the combined choirs (vs. 42). Apparently Nehemiah did not think it was unspiritual to give credit to the musicians for their work. (Nehemiah has demonstrated several times his concern to give people recognition for their contributions; recall the way he gave the names of the workers in ch. 3, as just one example.)

Verse 43 is a joy-full verse: "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* could be heard far away." This was not just the excitement of having a parade, nor was it a case of 'hype' or superficial lightheartedness. Nehemiah says "God had given them great joy" (NIV; NRSV says, "God had made them rejoice with great joy"). They were rejoicing over God's gifts (the renewal of the nation, symbolized by the rebuilt wall), but the rejoicing itself was a gift of God. We recall that joy is one of the preeminent fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), and Nehemiah himself said that "the joy of the LORD is your strength" (8:10). God says that true joy is his will for us (see Isa. 55:11-12).

Judah's recovery to this point was not back to the standards of David's and Solomon's time. The nation was only a fraction of its former size; even the temple was much smaller. The prospect that Judah would ever be free and powerful (politically, militarily, or economically) seemed remote at best. But the joy of worship had been restored, and that was Judah's chief blessing and source of strength. To know God as your God--that is reason to rejoice regardless of outward circumstances, and it is the strength needed to face the challenges of life. To belong to God is a greater reason to rejoice than being powerful or rich (neither of which Judah was at this time). To worship God was the central calling of Israel (Exod. 19:6). If they could do this, their inability to do other things was secondary in importance.

The chapter ends with a few verses (44-47) concerning the provisions made for the support of the ongoing ministry of the Levites, priests, singers, and gatekeepers by "the contributions, firstfruits and tithes" brought by the people. The Levites in turn contributed their

tithe to the priests, "the descendants of Aaron" (vs. 47). In setting this up, Nehemiah was following instructions found in the Law (vs. 44) and precedence from the time of David and Asaph (vs. 46; also vs. 36). The financial arrangements seemed to enjoy the enthusiastic support of the people of Judah, "for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites" (vs. 44), and "all Israel contributed" (vs. 47). Later, the enthusiasm proves to be temporary (ch. 13).

### Chapter 13: The Continuing Challenge of Obedience

The words which open this chapter, "on that day," can be a bit confusing. The most natural way to take this is to think that Nehemiah is referring to the day of the dedication ceremony (ch. 12). But as you continue to read, you find Nehemiah is actually talking about a time much later, when he had left Jerusalem and then returned to find a number of things in disarray (vss. 6ff). So the "day" referred to in vs. 1 is not the same day as in ch. 12. It is not possible actually to say just how much later it was. Certain facts about the timeline, however, can be established.

Nehemiah had first come to Jerusalem with authority to rebuild the walls in 445 B.C. Despite the obstacles and opposition, this had been accomplished within a matter of months. The religious reform about which we have been reading in the previous chapters occurred during and just after that project. Nehemiah stayed on in Jerusalem as governor for twelve years, returning to the court of Artaxerxes in 433 (13:6). The biblical text tells us nothing about any events of significance during those twelve years after the initial reform and rebuilding. Presumably Nehemiah supervised the ongoing rebuilding within the walls of Jerusalem and attended to the many concerns of a provincial governor who served the Persian government.

After some amount of time back in Babylon, Nehemiah once again asks permission from Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem (vss. 6-7). Judging by the number and kinds of things which he found out of order in Jerusalem, we might suppose that Nehemiah had been gone for several years, but he does not tell us. Nor does he tell us what prompted him to request another visit to Judah. Had he heard a disturbing report, which led him to suspect what in fact he found on arriving? That seems quite possible, but again we are only speculating, since Nehemiah did not care to tell us.

Nehemiah was more concerned to describe what he found in Jerusalem on his return, and, to put it mildly, it must have been disheartening. The problems he discovered involved many of the things mentioned in the people's solemn oath of covenant renewal (ch. 10). Consider the following comparisons:

#### **Chapter 10 promises**

vs. 37--tithes

vs. 39--"we won't neglect"

vs. 29--follow God's Law

vs. 31--"we won't buy"

vs. 30--won't marry pagans

#### **Chapter 13 practices**

vs. 10--no support for the Levites and priests

vs. 11--neglect of God's house

vs. 15--breaking the Sabbath

vs. 16--buying from Gentiles on the Sabbath

vs. 23--mixed marriages

Another disheartening comparison is seen between the provision made for storerooms in 12:44 and the use being made of one of those rooms in 13:5. Tobiah, Nehemiah's nemesis during and after the building of the wall, was occupying one of the rooms, by the permission of the priest in charge!

From Nehemiah's vigorous response to these discoveries, we can see that he would never have tolerated such things during the twelve years he had served as governor. Whoever had succeeded him, however, had let things slide considerably. Of course the people who were failing to live up to their oath of loyalty (ch. 10) could not simply blame lack of leadership for their own laxity and compromise. Still, it is evident that leadership had been weak, at least in

comparison with Nehemiah.

As we see in reading the entire chapter, Nehemiah takes steps immediately to correct the various problems. Now we can go back to vs. 1 and understand that the reference to "that day" means the time when Nehemiah once again sets reforms in motion, many years after the events of ch. 12. The authority for the new reforms is the Word of God, just as it had been years earlier.

God had instructed Israel specifically not to allow Ammonites and Moabites to participate in their religious assemblies (Deut. 23:3-6). This prohibition was based on history and religious factors, not racial reasons. Any alliance or close cooperation with the pagan nations immediately around Israel posed the danger of compromise and corruption by the mixing of religious observances (Exod. 34:12-16; see also 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). The possibility of a Moabite or Ammonite completely and faithfully embracing the faith and worship of Israel is not mentioned in the prohibitions, either in the Pentateuch or here in Nehemiah. We know from elsewhere in Scripture, however, that such an assimilation into Israel was in fact possible, as in the case of Ruth, who was a Moabite. (You might want to review the earlier discussion of this issue in Lesson 3.)

The episode involving Tobiah's presence in the temple (vss. 4-9) takes on more significance in this light. It was bad enough that he was occupying space which had been dedicated to other purposes. Insult was added to injury by the fact that this encroachment was made by the man who had fought Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls at every step. What is not mentioned explicitly here in ch. 13, however, is that Tobiah was probably an Ammonite! (See 2:10, 19, and 4:3.) There is some scholarly dispute about whether the references to "Tobiah the Ammonite" should be understood to refer to his nationality, to the area from which he came, or to the area he governed. Ironically, his name is actually a Jewish name, meaning "Yahweh is good." It may be that he was born to one of the many families of mixed marriages. Nehemiah 6:18 tells us that Tobiah had married into a Jewish family. What is clear, regardless of his national origin, is that his agenda was not the LORD's or Nehemiah's. His interests were not for the good of Judah or Judaism.

Whatever his race, Tobiah is an example of why God had commanded Israel to exclude Ammonites from their assemblies. In every way he had tried to use his considerable influence to hinder the re-establishment of Jerusalem as a spiritual and political center (recall 6:1-3, 17-19). He had gained significant 'clout' by his many 'connections' among the leading citizens of Judah, including Eliashib, the priest in charge of the storerooms (13:4). Tobiah's heart was not given to the faith of Israel (unlike Ruth the Moabite). He was not present in the temple to promote the interests of Israel or Israel's God; Tobiah was looking for ways to promote Tobiah. While someone like Ruth could be regarded as a justifiable exception to the banning of Moabites, Tobiah is an example who justifies the banning of Ammonites!

Nehemiah did not even ask Tobiah what business he had in the temple precincts. In a manner much like Jesus, centuries later, Nehemiah exercised authority to clean up the temple, personally throwing Tobiah's things out and then ordering the restoration of the room to its intended purpose (vss. 8-9; cf. John 2:13-16).

Nehemiah then took decisive action to restore the system of tithing for the support of the Levites (vss. 10-13). The Levites who had returned to working in the fields could hardly be blamed for leaving their ministry posts when their fellow Jews broke their promise to support them (10:37). Again it seems that the central failure was a failure of leadership. Nehemiah rebuked the "officials" who had the authority to enforce the tithe but had not done so.

Failure of leadership is even more evident in the next issue dealt with, the breaking of the Sabbath (vss. 15-22). Both by working on tasks that clearly could have waited until after the Sabbath (vs. 15) and by trading with Gentile merchants, the people were "desecrating the

Sabbath" (vs. 18). These kinds of things the leaders of Judah could have and should have prevented. Nehemiah rebukes them (vs. 17) and sets new policies regarding the city gates to prevent a recurrence (vss. 19-22).

The last significant issue addressed by Nehemiah is, once again, the problem of marriages with foreigners. The religious reasons for prohibiting such unions are evident in this passage (vss. 23-28). "Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah" (vs. 24). If this marriage practice continued to be tolerated, the spiritual heritage would be lost, for the coming generations would not know the Word of God. Knowledge of God's Word and habits of obedience have to be taught to each new generation, or the gains of past generations will be lost in a very short time. Nehemiah knew that Israel's history teaches the lesson clearly: whom you marry has spiritual consequences. Ask the wisest man who ever ruled over Israel! "Even he was led into sin by foreign women" (vs. 26).

Nehemiah's use of Solomon as an example of the dangers of marriage to foreigners shows us clearly that the concern of Nehemiah (and of God) was not a *racial* concern but a *religious* one. That is why someone like Ruth was acceptable in Israel, but the foreign wives of Solomon were not. Ruth embraced the faith of Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17). Solomon allowed his once pure faith to be polluted and compromised by his pagan wives, who did not abandon their gods but rather introduced Solomon to them. God's Word records that this was the beginning of the decline of Israel from its zenith of power and riches (see 1 Kings 11:1-11).

Nehemiah knew this history, but he had to give a history lesson to his fellow Jews. Once more we see that there was a sad lack of leadership while Nehemiah was away. The grandson of the high priest himself had married the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite, another longtime enemy of the renewal in Judah (vs. 28; recall chs. 4 and 6).

It may not have appeared so to others, but Nehemiah recognized that these marriages to people who did not adhere to the faith of Israel were marriages to the enemies of the faith. Marriage is not a religiously neutral matter (is anything?), for marriage sets in place those influences which are going to be most pervasive in our individual lives and most basic in our corporate lives. The importance of marrying within the faith is also taught in the New Testament, although with some differences from the Old Testament. (1 Cor. 7:12-16 addresses the case of people already married before one of them becomes a Christian. 1 Cor. 7:39 speaks about the widowed Christian, who should feel free to marry again, but only to another believer. 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 warns in general about being "yoked together with unbelievers," which would include marriage but also other covenants which commit us to share in another's life. Matt. 10:34-37 and Luke 19:29-30 warn that kingdom priorities may come into conflict with family priorities, and we may have to make difficult choices.)

It is interesting that Nehemiah's approach to this problem was not the same as Ezra's. Ezra had enforced divorce proceedings (Ezra 10). Nehemiah demanded oaths against further mixed marriages (Neh. 13:25), but he did not impose divorces on the existing marriages. We may speculate that he had observed that Ezra's earlier measures had not been very effective and may even have done more harm than good. Given the physical and verbal expression of his feelings on the issue (vs. 25), we can hardly say that his response was less vigorous than Ezra's!

Nehemiah ends the description of his second round of reforms with the summary of vss. 30-31. He purified the priests, organized their work assignments, and provided for the support of the ministry. His final words, like so often throughout the book, are directed toward God: "Remember me with favor, O my God."



Possible discussion questions

1. Have you ever decided to live in a particular location because it would best serve God's purposes in the world? What kind of factors usually influence our decisions on where to live?

2. Imagine you were part of the dedication celebration in ch. 12. At which points in the procession do you think your praise would have been the most heartfelt? Would it make a difference whether you had helped with the building project or had been only a spectator?

3. When you read how lax the observance of the Jews had become in ch. 13, how does it affect the way you would now read ch. 10?

4. Have you ever made promises to God (like Judah did in ch. 10), only to find yourself later living as though you had never made the promise? What would have helped you to keep your word?

5. Does our salvation depend more on our promises to God or his promises to us? Do our promises matter to God? to one another?

6. How do you suppose Nehemiah felt when he came back to Jerusalem? Do you suppose the people of Jerusalem were glad to see him come back?

7. Would you like for Nehemiah to come visit your house?

8. In what ways would you suggest Nehemiah could have done a better