

# **NEHEMIAH**

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## **BOOK**

Both Ezra and Nehemiah were originally two separate books. However, sometime before A.D. 100 they were composed as one book in Hebrew manuscripts. Origen (A.D. 185-253) was the first known writer to separate the two books (See introduction to Ezra). Both books together cover about 90 years of history.

## Rebuilding The Wall

(1:1 – 6:19)

**Outline:** (1) Commission of Nehemiah (1:1 – 2:8), (2) Plans for building (2:9-20), (3) Completion of the work (3:1 – 6:19)

### Chapter 1

#### COMMISSION OF NEHEMIAH

**1:1-3 Words of Nehemiah:** The information that is in this context could possibly have been taken from the memoirs of Nehemiah and transcribed here by another writer. For this reason, it is difficult to establish an exact date for the writing of the book. **Twentieth year:** This was the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes I (444 B.C.). Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign, which was 457 B.C. (Er 7:8). Though it seems that both Ezra and Nehemiah were in Jerusalem for some time together (Ne 8:9; 12:36), there is some evidence that Nehemiah actually went to Jerusalem before Ezra. Some Bible students believe that Ezra actually began his ministry much later, during the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes II, which would be 398 B.C. **Shushan:** Or, Susa. This was the winter capital of the Medo-Persian Empire. **Hanani ... came:** A delegation of men came from Judah who were approached by Nehemiah. It could be that Hanani was a brother of Nehemiah. If this is true, then we cannot discount the possibility that Nehemiah was actually born in Judah, and later immigrated to the Persian capital. **Left from the captivity:** These would be those who were left in the land of Pal-

estine by Nebuchadnezzar after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. We must also keep in mind that the first returnees of about 50,000 left for Judah 92 years before Nehemiah encounters this delegation from Judah, and subsequently leads another group of returnees. Since the initial return by Zerubbabel, Ezra had led a group back in 457 B.C. Nehemiah was born in exile, but was still sincere about his Jewish heritage and faith. **Great distress and reproach:** The residents of Judah were suffering the persecution of the Samaritans of the land. They were marginalized in every way because they were a conquered people from both the Assyrians and Babylonians many years before. **Wall ... broken down:** The first returnees under the leadership of Zerubbabel, and the second under Ezra, repaired the temple. But because of discouragement, they terminated reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem (See Ez 4:7-23). The existence of a temple manifested the religious identity of a people in those days. And thus, when the temple was complete, the initial returnees assumed that their identity as a religious group of the world had been restored.

**1:4-11 I sat down and wept:** Herein is revealed the passion of Nehemiah for his homeland, though it is possible that he had never been there before. He mourned, fasted, confessed and prayed for many days. **Fasted:** Those who are passionate for the work of God will fast. Their fasting is an indication of the sincerity of their prayers (See comments At 13:1-3). **Who keeps Your covenant:** It

was not that God broke the covenant. It was the people with whom God made the covenant who broke the conditions for maintaining the covenant. **Not kept the commandments:** When God establishes a covenant with men, men must keep the conditions of the covenant in order to receive the promises of the covenant. Every covenant that God establishes with man involves obedience on the part of man. Those conditions of obedience are established by God, not man. **But if you turn to Me:** If they broke the covenant, God had said that they would be scattered among the nations. This had taken place in the history of Israel since the time before the Assyrian captivity in 722/21 B.C. But God also promised that if they repented in the land of their captors, He would bring them again into their land of promise. An initial group of returnees had reaped the benefit of returning under the reign of Cyrus in 536 B.C, and a second group in 457 B.C. At this time Nehemiah sought to do the same. From the time he heard the news of the conditions in Judah, to the time of his departure, three to four months had transpired. **Make Your servant prosper:** Nehemiah uttered the prayer and endured the fasting. But he also stood up and took the challenge. He prayed and took action. Fasting and praying lays a burden on the heart of the one who fasts and prays with intensity. Passionate fasting and prayer always ends with action in the life of the one who is sincere about the work of God (See At 13:1-3). **Cupbearer:** Nehemiah introduced himself as one who was in a prominent position in the king's court in

Persia. As a cupbearer to the king, it was his responsibility to drink some of the king's wine before the king partook in order to see if it was poisoned. Some cupbearers also had official status in that they functioned as representatives for the king. In the case of Nehemiah, he was appointed as a governor to represent the Persian king in Judah.

## Chapter 2

**2:1-8 Nisan:** This was the first month of the Jewish year. This is the Aramaic name for the Hebrew name, Abib. This would be March/April. **I had not been sad before:** When one was before the king he was always to show a spirit of cheer and joy. But on this occasion, Nehemiah could not present himself in his usual demeanor because of the lengthy mourning, fasting and praying he had been experiencing for Jerusalem. **I took up the wine:** Some have suggested that there were several cupbearers who served before the king in different shifts. At the time he first heard the news from Judah, it was not Nehemiah's shift to serve before the king. When his shift came, it was too soon after his mourning, fasting and praying to present himself in the proper manner. This would answer the reason why the king was not informed concerning Nehemiah's passion for Jerusalem for three to four months after Nehemiah encountered the delegation from Jerusalem. **Send me:** Most seek for others to send on a mission for God, but Nehemiah stands forth as the one to be sent. Though he initially feared when the king discovered his sadness in

his presence, the king's favor, with the presence of the queen, motivated Nehemiah to seek the support of the king in reference to changing the conditions of Jerusalem. And thus, as the Lord stirred the spirit of Cyrus to allow the first exiles to return (Ez 1:1), so it could have been that the Lord did the same with Artaxerxes I in answer to the prayer of Nehemiah. ***I gave him a time:*** Nehemiah's first term in Judah was 12 years (5:14), after which he returned to Artaxerxes, and then went back to Judah (13:6,7). The first mission trip was not short. He left his family, friends and homeland in Shushan in order to go on an extended mission to Judea. He did not have a furlough for 12 years. ***Governors beyond the River:*** These were the Persian-appointed governors who served in the western territories of the Empire. On his way to Judah, Nehemiah would pass through the jurisdiction of several governors of the Persian Empire. He thus sought letters of authority that would allow him to pass unhindered and unquestioned. He did not want anyone to know what his mission was in reference to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. The permission to rebuild the walls that was given to Nehemiah was a reversal of the Persian king's decree that was made during the time of Ezra (Ez 4:21). In the former decree to stop the building of the walls, Artaxerxes had stated that the building should be stopped until another decree was made by him. Nehemiah's authorization, therefore, was the other decree, which decree gave Nehemiah authority to build the walls. What is sig-

nificant is the fact that Artaxerxes had great confidence in Nehemiah, that he was not going to lead a rebellion against the Medo-Persian Empire. ***The good hand of my God upon me:*** Nehemiah gave all credit for his success to God who was working through him.

### PLANS FOR BUILDING

#### 2:9,10 *Sanballat ... Tobiah:*

Sanballat was the governor of Samaria at the time Nehemiah was in Judah. His name is mentioned in a papyrus letter that was written from Elephantine in Egypt. The Tobiah family was a very influential family in the Palestinian area during the time of Nehemiah, and unto the 2<sup>nd</sup> century they maintained their influence throughout the region. Tobiah was evidently a wealthy landowner and aristocrat of the time, and thus had great influence throughout the region. The third individual that opposed Nehemiah's work was Geshem, a prominent Arab leader (19, 6:1,2,6). Sanballat and Tobiah represented the Samaritans and Geshem represented the Arabs. These two cultures of people were against anything that would advance the cause of the Jews. Geshem too was a very influential person in the region, and thus put his influence behind Sanballat and Tobiah to squash anything that the Jews attempted. The names of these three people are mentioned on several archaeological artifacts, including the writings of the Jewish historian, Josephus. ***Captains of the army and horsemen:*** Ezra had previously refused government protection on his exodus movement several years before (Er

8:22). But Nehemiah had special letters of authority from the government of Persia. He was not carrying with him a great amount of silver and gold as was Ezra. Ezra took all the articles of the temple back with him on his journey. ***It grieved them exceedingly:*** The Bible historian must keep in mind that the events of Esther's deliverance as the queen of the Persian Empire took place before the historical events of Nehemiah. In that deliverance the Jews throughout the Persian Empire were given authority by the Persian king to defend themselves against any who would seek to commit genocide against them (Et 8,9). The result was that the enemies of the Jews throughout the Medo-Persian Empire were overcome by the Jews. It seems that by the time of Nehemiah's arrival in Palestine, the local people were still suffering from their humiliation that resulted from the Jews defending themselves against their enemies throughout the Empire (See comments of Esther).

**2:11-16 *I did not tell anyone:*** Nehemiah was aware of the hostility of the local residents against any ambitions of the Jews. He thus kept his initial plans secret until he had made a plan for rebuilding. ***The rulers did not know:*** Those who eventually resisted the efforts of Nehemiah were actually influential rulers in the region. Though Nehemiah was working under the authority of the Persian king, the local rulers of the Empire were working against him. These local rulers had exerted so much pressure on the local Jews who originated from the returnees who had come to

Judah 90 years before Nehemiah, and those who came with Ezra, that they were discouraged. They had since terminated any rebuilding efforts of the city of Jerusalem. They had the desire, but lacked the leadership that would lead them against the official rulers of the region. With the coming of Nehemiah, however, a new leadership had arrived with the authority of the Persian king. Nehemiah was an astringent leader, and thus the type of leader that was needed for the times.

**2:17-20 *The hand of my God that was good upon me:*** In order for God's leaders to be strong leaders, they must firmly and passionately believe that God is working in their lives. Nehemiah had seen no miracles, nor seen any visions. He had not experienced the presence of any angels. Nevertheless, he had the great faith that was needed to do a work for God that was against the powers that existed in Palestine at the time of his arrival (See comments Rm 8:28-37). ***Let us rise up and build:*** The presence of leadership that radiated from him moved the people. The people rose up at the exhortation of Nehemiah and began to build. They did so because of their desire to work for God. The faith of Nehemiah was the spark of encouragement that they needed to begin the work. ***Mocked us to scorn:*** The opposition to the work of God first came by mocking. Through mocking the enemies of God seek to embarrass those who are doing the work. Mocking of one's work, therefore, is often evidence that one is doing the right thing. If one is not confident

that his work is of God, then mocking will quickly cause one to terminate his efforts. ***The God of heaven, He will prosper us:*** The answer to mocking is to be reassured that God is working for one to complete his task. Nehemiah's confidence to do the work of God resulted from his knowledge of the will of God for Israel. ***You have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem:*** As in Ezra's refusal to allow Gentiles to participate in that which was assigned only to the Israelites (Er 4:2), so Nehemiah here reaffirms that what he and the Jews were doing was for Israel, not the Gentiles. His focus was to preserve the heritage of Israel for the coming of the Messiah. No Gentile who was not a proselyte could help preserve this Israelite heritage.

### Chapter 3

#### COMPLETION OF THE WORK

**3:1-32 *The priests:*** The spiritual leaders led in the work of rebuilding. They were not the type of spiritual leaders who refused to get their hands dirty. What is significant about the building of the wall was the organization by which it was carried out, and the fact that everyone had a specific section of the wall he was to repair. They all worked on the same project, but in their designated areas of work. In their assigned locations of the wall to repair, they were to begin with that section of the wall that was nearest their house (See vs 10,23,28,29,30). Their impetus for repairing the wall, therefore, began by each family seeing their responsibility to secure their own houses by building that portion of the

wall that was nearest their home. In this chapter, those who are mentioned are identified as those who were loyal to the project. In the years to come, the families who descended from these initial builders would know that their fathers had been loyal to the project of rebuilding the walls. It was possibly the objective of the Holy Spirit in mentioning these names, to inform the descendants and all Jews of the dedicated work of those who were loyal to the rebuilding project. ***But their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work:*** The repairs were led by Nehemiah, the priests and the people. However, those who felt themselves too good to be involved in manual labor refrained from the work. The nobles had thus set themselves aside, and thus disqualified themselves before God because they did not do the work. The mention of the inaction of the nobles verifies the truth that God seeks those who will put their hands to the work and work in cooperation with all who are laboring for His glory. ***Official seat of the governor:*** Since Nehemiah was now governor of Judah, the repairs took place under the authority of the Persian king. ***Nehemiah the son of Azbuk:*** This was not Nehemiah the governor, whose actions are revealed in this book. ***Ruler of half the district of Jerusalem:*** Jerusalem proper was divided into different areas over which specific rulers were assigned authority (See vs 9,12,15,16,17,18). ***Gate:*** Very little remains today of the walls that were rebuilt in Jerusalem by Nehemiah's fellow workers. Small portions of a wall have been discovered west of the present

temple area that possibly date back to the time of Hezekiah (2 Ch 32:5). The construction of the temple by Herod the Great prior to the coming of Jesus was a reconstruction of much of the site where Nehemiah reconstructed the wall. By the time of Herod, the city had far outgrown the geographical size of the city that existed at the time of Nehemiah.

## Chapter 4

**4:1-3** *Sanballat ... was furious and very angry:* Sanballat surely saw the efforts of the Jews as an attack against his authority, and possibly his economic status. It at least stirred up his prejudice against the Jews. His statements in verse 2 indicate that he had little regard for the Jews. He was suspicious of anything they did that would suggest a rebellion. He had little regard for their beliefs, and thus could not understand their dedication for preserving the heritage of Israel. At this time in the rebuilding project, it seems that he was about to muster the army of Samaria in order to join his mockery of the Jews. At least he was using the army as a threat to the Jews.

**4:4,5** *Give them up for plunder:* The interjection of Nehemiah's imprecatory prayer is a plea to God for relief from opposition. As many of the imprecatory Psalms, the judgment of God is called upon by the one uttering the prayer. In this case, Nehemiah calls on God to bring down judgment immediately on those who mocked and discouraged his work.

**4:6-9** *The people had a mind to work:* The people's answer to the mockery of Sanballat and his friends was to

continue to work. If one is focused on the work of God, his mind is kept off the slanderous words of those who would mock him in God's work. ***All of them conspired together:*** Since mockery did not stop the work of the Jews, then their enemies escalated their attack by conspiring against them. ***We made our prayer to God:*** This is the answer to both mockery and conspiracy. Since the people had a mind to work, they would not be deterred from the objective that Nehemiah had set before them. He knew how to organize the people for work, and he knew how to agonize under the threat of opposition. Such personal characteristics make for a great leader.

**4:10-12** There was talk among the enemies of an outright attack against the Jews. Though carrying out such an attack would have been contrary to the decree of the king of Persia, they at least made a plan to attack. But when such a plan became known to the Jews, the Jews did not deter from the work.

**4:13,14** Regardless of knowing that the good hand of God was for him, Nehemiah took every precaution against the possibility of an attack from the army of Samaria. Our faith, therefore, must not move us to do foolish things. And in this case, not making plans for defense would have been foolish. Faith does not discount wisdom. ***Do not be afraid of them:*** But some were afraid, thus necessitating the exhortation of Nehemiah to be courageous. Nehemiah's leadership was characterized by prayer, being watchful for the work of Satan, encouragement of those who were engaged in the work, and

taking up arms for defense. We would assume that the king of Persia saw all these leadership characteristics in Nehemiah before he commissioned him to go to Judah.

**4:15-23** Nehemiah's defensive organization was skillfully carried out. Families were to protect one another. Work was to continue, but the workers were to arm themselves. The best way to divert conflict is a show of strength. Nehemiah did not want the enemies of Israel to think that they were unprepared to defend themselves by use of swords and spears. Nehemiah ordered the Jews of the surrounding regions to come to Jerusalem in order to defend the workers. The work was so intense that the workers labored and slept in their clothes. They were constantly ready for work or defense. The atmosphere was thus tense, for they worked under the threat of attack. What they did in reference to accomplish their task explains the mind to work that they had. God accomplishes great things through those who are determined to work for His causes. But He can do little through those who are easily discouraged.

### Chapter 5

**5:1-5** The social problem that Nehemiah encountered was that the wealthier Jews were taking advantage of their fellow Jews. There was a famine in the land, and subsequently some of the Jews had put themselves in debt in order to pay their taxes. Some had to give themselves as servants to their fellow Jews because they had borrowed from

them in order to pay their taxes. Because of their greed, the wealthier Jews were using a time of distress as an opportunity to impoverish their fellow Jews. This practice did not stop at this time in history. The culture of the rich Sadducean Jews originated sometime in the years after Nehemiah and was present at the time of the ministry of Jesus (See introduction to Js.)

**5:6-13 *Exacting usury:*** Or, interest. They were charging interest on loans from fellow Jews, which thing was contrary to the law (Ex 22:25; Dt 23:19,20). Being a person who was leading the people in difficult times, the natural reaction of Nehemiah against such greed would be anger. ***Consulted with myself:*** Before he let it be known what he thought, Nehemiah carefully thought over the matter. In his discretion, he knew that a stern rebuke was needed in order to correct the injustice. He thus thought about what and how he would say that which needed to be said. He reminded the nobles and wealthier Jews that he had not exacted pay from them as the official governor of the land. He had a right to require taxes from them as a representative of the king of Persia, but he did not demand their money. ***This very day:*** Nehemiah did not give them time for cancelling the debts. He demanded that all such debts be cancelled immediately. This they did since they had no answer to his argument that he had not assumed his right to exact payment from them as the governor of Judah. ***Hundredth part:*** They were not only to restore their lands and houses, but also the

one percent monthly interest that they had charged. **We will restore:** We would assume that if they did not restore what they had loaned to their fellow Jews, then Nehemiah would exact tax from them for what they owed him. **Shook out the front of my garment:** This was a symbolic gesture to manifest disgust and repudiation (Compare 1 Kg 22:11; Jr 27:2; 28:10; Mt 10:14; At 13:51; 18:6).

**5:14-19 Not eaten the bread of the governor:** Everyone knew that Nehemiah had not taken that which he deserved as the appointed governor of Judah. The supplying of his own needs was an example to the rest that they should not take advantage of others for the sake of gain (See comments At 20:33-35).

## Chapter 6

**6:1-3 Come, let us meet together:** Though in this case they thought to do harm to Nehemiah, one would do well to review the exhortation that Paul gave to Titus concerning meetings with those who have evil motives (See comments Ti 3:9-11). In this case, the mocking did not stop the Jews' work on the wall. Conspiracy did not stop the work. The threat of a military attack did not stop the work. So Sanballat and Geshem moved to take out the leader, that is, Nehemiah. When there are meetings called by those who oppose the work of God, the first thing God's leaders must determine is if the meeting is for edification or destruction. If it is known that those who call the meeting oppose the work of God, then God's leaders should not show up at the

meeting. Such meetings, as Paul wrote to Titus, encourage confrontation and division over matters of no consequence. They intimidate the righteous to conform to the wishes of the disgruntled. Such meetings should never be called in the first place. The fact that such meetings are called by those who oppose the work of God should alert the righteous that evil men have unrighteous motives for having such meetings. **I am doing a great work so that I cannot come down:** This is the reply of a righteous leader to those religious leaders who have evil motives for conducting destructive meetings. One should be so involved in the work of God that he does not have time for meetings that involve those who are either jealous or have religious politics at heart. The fact that one refuses to participate in destructive meetings is not to say that he is divisive. It simply reveals that the righteous worker has enough sense to determine what is a destructive meeting, and thus stays involved in the work and away from those who seek to do him harm. Every meeting that Christians have should be for exhortation and encouragement (See comments 1 Co 14; Hb 10:24,25).

**6:4-9 They sent to me four times:** Satan will be persistent in organizing an occasion for destruction. Those with political motives will not take no for an answer, and thus will be persistent in trying to engage the righteous in meetings wherein they can intimidate those who are involved in the work of God. **Open letter:** Letters are usually drawn up by those who seek to promote their evil agendas. In this case, the letter was to

intimidate Nehemiah. But God's leaders will not be intimidated by the actions of wicked men. Their wickedness is manifested in their desires to have harmful meetings and in writing letters that slander the righteous. ***It is reported:*** In order to intimidate Nehemiah, Sanballat and his cohorts resorted to slander. Slander is speaking evil of another with the intent of destroying the reputation of another (See comments 3 Jn 9,10). ***You are inventing them:*** Nehemiah's reply to Sanballat was direct. He essentially called him a slanderous liar. ***Now it will be reported to the king:*** The threat of Sanballat was to send the slanderous letter to the king of Persia. It is a common practice of those who are political in their motives to slander the righteous before either the public or kings in order to intimidate the righteous to conform to their desires. They will publicly report that they sought a meeting, but the ones to whom they sought to do harm refused to meet with them. They unknowingly reveal their arrogance by publicly proclaiming that all with whom they disagree should meet with them for the sake of unity. And in their meetings, they argue with the righteous that they conform to their desires for the sake of unity. But when one is intimidated to conform to the desires of those with whom he may disagree concerning the work of God in the area of opinion, then the righteous sin. As the case of Nehemiah and the Jews, they were doing the work of God. They would not be intimidated into terminating their work in order to have unity with those whose motives were political.

***Trying to make us afraid:*** Or, they were trying to intimidate them into stopping their work. But the confidence of Nehemiah prevailed. He knew that he had the sanction of the king of Persia, and thus Sanballat's letter to the king would avail nothing. Nehemiah personally knew the king, for he was the king's cupbearer, and the king knew him. When one knows that he is working for King Jesus, no unrighteous person who poses to be a believer should be able to intimidate those who know their King (See comments 2 Tm 1:12; 2:19).

**6:10-14 *Shemaiah ... a secret informer:*** It was possible that Shemaiah wanted Nehemiah to go into the inner chambers of the temple where only the priests were allowed to go (Nm 18:7). If Nehemiah went into this part of the temple, accusation could be made against him (See 2 Ch 26:16-23). A leader who is the head of state, but also seeks to be the religious leader of the people, is setting himself up to be a god of the people. If Nehemiah acted on the advice of Shemaiah, there would have been just accusation against him. ***Should such a man as I flee:*** Those who would be leaders of God's people must understand that there is a cross to bear, and a death they must possibly face (See comments Lk 14:25-35; Rv 2:10). If they are not willing to bear their cross, then they are not men such as Nehemiah (Compare Mk 10:35-39). And few there are who are of such a nature. There are many who want to be leaders, but few who are willing to carry the burden of persecution (See comments At 14:22). ***Tobiah and Sanballat***

**had hired him:** The word of hirelings must always be questioned. When in times of distress and famine, as the times were when these events occurred, the motives of hirelings are usually to preserve their means of support. Nehemiah recognized that the motives of Shemaiah were unrighteous because he was seeking to secure his support by luring him into doing that which was contrary to the law of God. **The rest of the prophets:** It seems that there were several preachers on the payroll of men like Tobiah and Sanballat. They too were seeking to stop the work of God. However, Nehemiah was a leader who was willing and able to stand alone against the majority. When one understands his destiny from God, then the opposition of the majority should have no bearing on his work.

**6:15-19** Regardless of all the opposition, Nehemiah and those faithful people who were working with him, accomplished their goal. **Enemies ... were very disheartened:** They were disheartened because they knew that under great opposition the Jews had accomplished the work. And if they were so determined to complete the work of rebuilding the walls under such opposition, then there was no way that they were going away. The Jews were there to stay, and the completion of the walls of Jerusalem was a statement to all the nations that they were there to stay. It is possible that the nations knew that if the Jews stayed, they would threaten their economic status in the area, for the Jews were very effective in their productivity. Under the direction of Nehemiah they had sorted out

the problem of charging interest from one another. Now they would again work as a united group in order to become economically strong in the region. **Tobiah sent letters:** Though the walls were completed, the threats continued. God's workers must always be vigilant in reference to those who oppose the work of God. Later, Tobiah, in the absence of Nehemiah, was allowed to take up residence in the temple area (13:4-7).

### Reforms And Resistance

(7:1 – 13:31)

**Outline:** (1) Reorganization (7:1-73), (2) Restoration (8:1 – 10:39), (3) Repopulation (11:1 – 12:26), (4) Rededication (12:27-43), (5) Reforms (12:44 – 13:31)

### Chapter 7

#### REORGANIZATION

**7:1-3 Hanani:** This brother of Nehemiah, who had first reported concerning the conditions of Jerusalem (1:2,3), and subsequently returned with Nehemiah, was put in charge of the city. **A faithful man:** When men are faithful, they can be used by God for great things. Because of their faithfulness, people assume that they are trustworthy (1 Tm 1:12). People will follow trustworthy leaders, for they know that the leader will be there when he is needed.

**7:4-73 The people in it were few:** From the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., to the time of Nehemiah, the city of Jerusalem had been depopulated. The approximately fifty thousand returnees

who came with Zerubbabel on the first return in 536 B.C. settled primarily in the rural areas of Palestine. The few thousand who came with Ezra in 457 B.C. settled in Jerusalem and the immediate area. Because of the small population in the city, special measures were taken in order to make those in the city safe. Thus the gates were closed at night, and not opened until everyone was up and alert in the morning. **Might be registered by genealogy:** Nehemiah planned to repopulate the city. However, in order to do this, he first wanted to make sure that those who lived in the city were true Jews. Again, he gave credit to God for his plans. With everything, Nehemiah gave credit to God who had put it in his heart to accomplish any task in reference to the reestablishment of Israel in Palestine. We assume, therefore, that he thoroughly realized the purpose for the repopulation of the land and the reestablishment of the Israelite nation. In order for the promises concerning the Messiah to be recognized as fulfilled through Israel, Israel had to exist as a nation when the Messiah came. And in order for Israel to exist as a nation, both Ezra and Nehemiah were very strict concerning the racial purity of the Jews. **Register of the genealogy:** Except for minor variations, this registration of returnees is the same as that which is given in Ezra 2. It is a registration of those who came to the land under the leadership of Zerubbabel approximately 92 years before Nehemiah. Some have suggested that the variations in the lists may be that the Ezra 2 list was the original list that was made in

Babylon before the returnees left for Palestine. The one given here was probably the final list of those who actually arrived in the land, and thus included corrections. **All Israel dwelt in their cities:** This finalizing statement of verse 73 indicates that the vision of resettlement had been accomplished. The temple had been rebuilt under the leadership of Ezra. The city of Jerusalem was considered rebuilt by the completion of the walls. The Persians had willingly commissioned the work of both Ezra and Nehemiah in order to make Jerusalem an official city of authority for the Persian Empire. Persia had put down an Egyptian revolt in 460 B.C., and thus Jerusalem functioned as an official outpost of authority to those peoples who were south of Jerusalem, but at the time, under the control of the Persian Empire. The Persians viewed the Israelites as a people who were governed by a priestly system, as well as local governors (See Hg 1:1,14; Zc 4). Such a governing system was less threatening to Persia than the common rule of a king. In the history of Israel after the period of exile, the rule of the priests became dominant, and subsequently had become the primary system of control by the time of Jesus. Herod the Great was a king, but he was only a vassal of the Roman Empire at the time, for Rome occupied Palestine when Jesus was born.

## Chapter 8

### RESTORATION

#### 8:1-8 *Bring the book of the law:*

Chapters 8 & 9 are a record of great revival and restoration among the Jews. In

order to have such a restoration, all the people must resort to the word of God. The word of God is always the foundation upon which revival or restoration can be accomplished. Revival to God on any other foundation leads people away from the commandments of God. Revivals that are based on the emotions of people, are led by the uncertainty of emotional changes. Revivals that are based on dynamic individuals, dispel after the death of the individual, or at least circle around and become that from which the original leader led the people. They do so when the followers canonize the teachings of the primary personality of the revival. Therefore, true revivals are identified as such when people turn their focus to the reading and understanding of the word of God. **Law of Moses:** Nehemiah used the terms “law of Moses” and “law of God” to refer to the same law. In verse 1, the people “*told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had commanded Israel.*” However, in verse 8, it says that “*they read distinctly in the books*” – the same book as verse 1 – “*from the law of God ....*” Again in verse 18 it is recorded that Ezra “*read in the book of the law of God.*” Nehemiah, therefore, used the terms “law of Moses” and “law of God” to refer to the law “*which the Lord had commanded Israel*” (vs 1). There were not two separate laws given to Israel, one moral and the other ceremonial. There was only one law given which was referred to with different terms or phrases. The reason the phrase “law of Moses” is used is simply because the “law of God” was given

through Moses. Moses never claimed to give any law to Israel that originated from himself. He was only the mediator through whom the law of God was given. In other words, the law of God was given to Israel through Moses, and thus, the law originated from Moses to whom it had been given by God. **Ezra:** Prior to this event, Ezra had been teaching the people the word of God. He had been laying the ground work for what happened at this time in the history of the returnees. **Ezra opened the book:** That is, he unrolled the scroll, for books with pages did not exist at this time in the history of the world. **The people stood up:** Since there existed at this time in history only a few copies of the law, the people greatly cherished hearing the words of God. They stood up in respect of the word. They lifted their hands in praise. They bowed their heads and worshiped because they were moved by what they heard. **Caused the people to understand:** We must keep in mind that those who returned from captivity were second and third generation Jews, and thus spoke Aramaic, the language of their captors. This would have been particularly true of those Jews who returned with Ezra and Nehemiah. Aramaic was the official language of the Persian Empire, and thus those Jews who lived in Babylon spoke this language, which language they brought with them from Babylon. Their forefathers were taken into captivity on or before 586 B.C. Ezra’s return was in 457 B.C. and Nehemiah’s in 444 B.C. This was a period of well over one hundred years. When Ezra read the law on this occasion,

he read it in the Hebrew language, the language in which the law was written. However, most of the people who listened, particularly the younger generation, spoke Aramaic as their first language, and Hebrew as their second.

**8:9-12 *All the people wept:*** They wept because they realized that their forefathers, and themselves as a result, had suffered so much because of disobedience of the word of God. The glory of the Israelite nation had long passed because of the idolatry of the fathers. ***Do not mourn:*** Nehemiah's encouragement was that they stood at a time of repentance, and thus it was a time of rejoicing. They must forget the past and move on to the future. His was a message of hope for the future. ***The joy of the Lord is your strength:*** And how true this is. People who are filled with the joy of the Lord understand the grace of God (See Is 41:18; Jn 4:14). Their joy is based on the fact that they realized that they are forgiven. True joy, therefore, is based on mourning over our past sins, understanding God's forgiving grace, and obedience to the word of God. It is not based on the social environment in which one lives (See Ph 4:4). ***All the people ... rejoiced greatly:*** The reading of the law gave the people direction. Nehemiah's words sparked a message of hope that was based on their repentance. By understanding the mercy and grace of God in reference to their idolatrous past, the people revived in their spirit and rejoiced. Their repentance was evidenced by their keeping of the feasts that are described in this and the following chapters.

**8:13-18 *Dwell in booths:*** This was the feast of tabernacles (See Lv 23:40-43). The text indicates that this feast had not been observed in this manner since the days of Joshua who lived and led Israel in the conquest of the land about one thousand years before. ***Read in the book:*** From the first day of the feast to the last, for seven days, they read from the law. It was a lectureship where only God spoke through the reading of the law (See comments 1 Tm 4:13).

## Chapter 9

**9:1-4 *Read ... confessed ... worshiped:*** In order to prevent doing what their fathers did, they were committed to being directed by the word of God. Their commitment was manifested by their confession. And their confession was declared sincere by their worship. From the time of Solomon, who introduced idolatry into Israel as a ruling king, to the time of the carrying away of captives by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., idolatry had been a part of the culture of Israel. But from the time of the revival of Ezra and Nehemiah forward, the people committed themselves to never again be involved in the practice of idolatry. For this reason they put away the foreign women they had married (Er 10).

**9:5-8** Their confession began with a recognition of God's covenant that He made with Abraham. God had promised that from Abraham a great nation would come. The Jews' rededication to God and the covenant was here made in order that the remnant be the restored nation of Israel through whom God would bring the

Messiah into the world. Throughout their history God was faithful to His promise. Now it was time for Israel to be faithful.

**9:9-15** God's faithfulness to Israel was not just in words, but in action. He delivered them from the bondage of Egypt. He protected them from the army of the Egyptians. He provided for them in the wilderness. He guided them through the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. They thus had no excuse for the apostasy that later followed in the history of Israel. *By the hand of Moses:* This text explains how God delivered His law to the Jews. The law originated with God. It was delivered only to Israel through Moses. Ne 9:13,14 made this clear when Nehemiah said that God came down on Mt. Sinai and gave Israel the commandments "*by the hand of Moses Your servant.*" From what Nehemiah stated in this passage, it is easy to understand that the law of God that was given to the Jews is referred to as the law of Moses only because it was given to the Jews through Moses. The ten commandments, as well as all the Old Testament law, came through Moses (Mk 7:10; Ex 20:12). The Old Testament law was "*spoken through angels*" (Hb 2:2), but it was "*appointed through angels in the hand of a mediator*" (Gl 3:19; At 7:53). That mediator was Moses. It is called the "law of Moses" simply because it was given to Israel through Moses.

**9:16-21** Regardless of God's care they hardened their hearts by refusing to submit in response to His care. At Mt. Sinai they rebelled and sought to return to Egypt. Though at that time in the his-

tory of Israel God was willing to destroy the entire nation and start again with the heritage of Moses, through the intercession of Moses, God was merciful. Though they deserved retribution, God gave manna and water to them in order to preserve them from the harshness of the wilderness to which they were condemned for forty years of wandering.

**9:22-25** God was faithful to give them the land of promise in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. He thus strengthened them in order to expel the Canaanites from the land. They subdued and possessed the land, which land brought forth abundantly. It was not only a land rich in productivity, but also a land that was the trade route of the nations to the north of them and Africa to the south. They had the opportunity to speak of the wonders of God to passing traders, but instead, they gave themselves over to idolatry and became as the nations. When they became fat in the goodness of His blessings, they turned from God, and thus gave up an opportunity to teach the world of the one true and living God who had blessed them. Instead of teaching the greatness of the one God, they blasphemed His name among the nations.

**9:26-31** Regardless of God's blessings, they were disobedient. God's system of punishment to continually bring forth repentance in their lives was to deliver them into the hands of their enemies. Throughout their time of rebellion, therefore, they were brought under the bondage of their enemies, under which bondage they repented. They were subsequently restored, but again returned to a

life of rebellion. This cycle of rebellion, bondage, repentance and deliverance carried on throughout their history until the last deliverance into the bondage of the Babylonians. Their existence in the land of promise at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah was evidence that God had not turned His back on His people. They were back in the land, but only as a remnant. Nevertheless, they were at this time a remnant that was committed to rebuilding the nation of Israel.

**9:32-38** These final words of their confession revealed their commitment to start anew as a nation. They were willing to do that which was right in order to restore themselves as the people of God. Though they had sinned in the past, they committed themselves to the future by calling on God's help to deliver them from their present enemies. As God had delivered them from those who brought them into bondage in the past, so they were asking for His deliverance from the economic bondage which they were in at the time of this revival. In order to make their commitment to be obedient to God, they made a covenant. It was written and sealed by the leaders. The making of this covenant was a result of their initiative. It was not a commandment of God. When we thus seek to restore ourselves to God, it is right for the repentant to make a covenant of faithfulness to the will of God.

## Chapter 10

**10:1-27** The names of the leaders who sealed the covenant for the people were here given for the posterity of Is-

rael to come. It was a document that was verified, and thus the fathers were here binding their children to an agreement with God to remain faithful to the word of God. By placing their names on the covenant of loyalty, the leaders were placing themselves under an oath to God. The oath was binding as the law of God, and thus was not to be taken lightly.

**10:28-39** There were several things that the people bound on themselves as a part of the oath of the covenant. In order to preserve the purity of the Israelite race, they would not intermarry with those of other nations. As a nation, they promised to honor the Sabbath that was given as sign of the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai. In order to maintain the temple, the symbol of their spiritual connection with God, they promised to pay the tabernacle tax that was required by the law. They made a commitment to provide wood in order that the altar sacrifices continue (See Lv 6:12,13). They also promised to continually support their spiritual leaders who ministered before the Lord on their behalf (See 10:37; 13:10,12; Nm 18:21-24). In order to financially make all this possible, they renewed their commitment to pay their tithes and give the firstfruits of their crops. The firstborn of their livestock and sons were also committed to the Lord. *The Sabbath:* Since the keeping of the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel, in this context they made a renewed commitment to honor it. By the time of the Romans, the Romans considered the Jews lazy because they kept the Sabbath. The Sab-

bath rest was a weekly holiday that was kept only by the Jews. ***We will not neglect the house of our God:*** There was certainly a spiritual connotation to this promise in view of the context of the oath that the people were making to God. Their neglect of the temple in the past was a manifestation of their rebellion against God. Their commitment to God in the future, therefore, would be manifested by their maintenance of the physical structure of the temple. However, their focus was not on the physical structure, but on their commitment to be obedient to God, and thus be the spiritual house of God (See comments 1 Tm 3:15).

### Chapter 11 REPOPULATION

**11:1,2 *Rulers:*** Most of the priests and Levites dwelt in Jerusalem. The remainder of the people lived in the small towns, villages and farms of Judah. However, it seems that Nehemiah wanted to have a representative of each family living in Jerusalem. The wisdom behind this was that through those living in Jerusalem, communication with their families in the other towns, villages and farms could be maintained. Nehemiah did not want the urban population of Jerusalem to separate itself from the rest of the population. This had happened in the history of Israel before their captivity, and he did not want it to happen again.

**11:3-36** The remainder of chapter 11 is a register of the heads of the families who would live in Jerusalem. We would assume that most did not live within the walls of the city, but also in the outlying

farms and villages that surrounded Jerusalem. ***Outside work of the house of God:*** In some translations this is rendered “outward business” (11:16). ***The principal to begin the thanksgiving:*** This was the leader who began the prayers of thanksgiving. ***Nethinims:*** These were the temple servants. ***The king’s deputy:*** This was the official representative of the king of Persia.

### Chapter 12

**12:1-26** The listing of names in these verses is a continuation of the list of the previous chapter. In this listing emphasis is on the descendants of the priests and Levites who originally went to Jerusalem in the exodus led by Zerubbabel that took place over 90 years before the ministry of Nehemiah. As with all such listings, the function of the list was to register the names in order to establish the identity of the true Israelites. We must keep in mind that the century from the time of Zerubbabel to Nehemiah was a period of time for the new beginning for Israel. The Jews had lost their identity as a nation in the promised land because of the captivities. With the decree of Cyrus to allow the rebuilding of the temple, Israel was on a quest to identify its existence as the people of God in Palestine, and thus the chosen people through whom God would send the Messiah into the world.

### REDEDICATION

**12:27-30** The reconstruction of the walls had already been completed, as explained in chapter 12. However, in

order to lay the foundation for the rededication of the city, which was symbolized by the dedication of the walls of the city, other logistical matters had to be set in place. The population of the people had to be distributed, both in Jerusalem, as well as throughout Judea. In this context, we would assume that the reading of the law by Ezra centered around those contexts that dealt with the existence of the nation of Israel, her sins and repentance. The people had to make a covenant to keep the law. This was in conjunction with fasting, prayer and the feast of tabernacles. All these things took some time to accomplish, but prepared the people for the events that are recorded in this chapter.

**12:31-43 Upon the wall:** There were two groups, one led by Ezra and the other led by Nehemiah. They marched around the top of the wall in opposite directions. They came together at the area of the temple, where there was a great celebration. The people had a great deal to celebrate. After almost 100 years from the time of the first return of exiles through the leadership of Zerubbabel, they could now rejoice over the fact that the temple and walls of the city were reestablished as symbols of the existence of the nation of Israel. Though still under the domain of the Persian Empire, Israel could rejoice in her identity as a people who had finally come together as one nation in the land of promise. **Musical instruments of David:** David had introduced musical instruments into the celebrations of the Jews (See 1 Sm 10:5; 2 Sm 6:5; Ps 150:3; 1 Ch 16:42; 25:1; 2 Ch 5:12;

29:25). **Wives ... children:** Though the women did not customarily participate in the Jewish celebrations, on this occasion everyone was included. It was a day of national celebration and everyone of those who represented the remnant of Israel was to participate in the joyous occasion.

## REFORMS

**12:44-47** Mentioned in this context are various reforms that Nehemiah made after he returned from the Persian king. He was initially in Palestine for twelve years (5:14; 13:6), after which he made a brief return to the Persian capital. What is interesting is the manifestation of his astringent leadership in initiating these reforms upon his return. Knowing that Israel must preserve her identity in order to be identified as the nation through whom God fulfilled His promises, he was stern in implementing what had to be done in order to comply with the law of God. **The offerings:** In order to perpetuate the sacrifices, the priests and Levites had to be supported. After the celebrations and dedication of the walls, therefore, Nehemiah appointed those who would administer the contributions for the support of the priests and Levites. Even the singers and gatekeepers were to receive their portion of the peoples' tithes. Support of those who minister to the spiritual needs of the people is beneficial for the people. The people always need spiritual leadership. And in order to guarantee that spiritual leadership exists, then the worshipers of God must make sure that those who seek to give

themselves to the people for spiritual leadership be adequately supported (See comments 2 Co 9:6,7). It has always been God's plan that His people financially support those who commit themselves to the spiritual leadership of His flock. If one is worthy of such support, then he is to be supported.

### Chapter 13

**13:1-9** Nehemiah was passionate about reforming and maintaining purity in Israel. When we read through his actions that are recorded in this chapter we are reminded of Jesus' actions in cleansing of the temple (Mt 21:12,13; Mk 11:15-17; Lk 19:45,46; Jn 2:13-17). We are also reminded of how Jesus dealt with the Pharisees who hypocritically professed the law, but live contrary to it (Mt 23:13-36). The example of the lives of Nehemiah, and Jesus while in the flesh, illustrate that there must be radical change when sin is involved. **No Ammonite or Moabite:** The sincerity of the people in their efforts to keep the law was here manifested. When they read in the law that they were not to join themselves in any way to the Ammonites or Moabites, they excluded the Ammonites and Moabites from their fellowship (See Dt 23:3-5). **Eliashib ... Tobiah:** Neither marital relationships or relationships through relatives were to be maintained if they led to compromising or violating the law of God. In this case, Eliashib was related by marriage to Tobiah, an Ammonite, and a person who previously joined in opposition to Nehemiah. **I cast out all the household goods of Tobiah:**

Tobiah was a Gentile. Not only were his household goods cast out, but Tobiah himself was thrown out. Tobiah's presence among the consecrated vessels of worship was an outrage. We must never underestimate the influence of relationships through marriage. In this case, Eliashib had committed a grievous sin, about which Nehemiah was sorely disturbed.

**13:10-13** Because the people failed to support the Levites, they had to return to their fields and raise crops for food. During Nehemiah's absence while he was in Shushan, it seems that the people failed to carry through on their promise to support the Levites. We must keep in mind that this was a first generation of people to live according to the demands of the law. They were not accustomed to supporting the Levites, and thus needed the firm leadership of Nehemiah. **I contended with the rulers:** It was a failure of leadership that led to the lack of support for the Levites and temple servants. It seems that the people were falling back to their old way of life of caring for themselves and ignoring the spiritual matters of Israel. When God's people do not support their spiritual leaders, it is a sign of spiritual immaturity.

**13:14-22** The Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel. The other nations did not keep the Sabbath, and thus, when Israel kept the Sabbath it was a manifestation, a signal, that they were keeping it because of their covenant with God. While Nehemiah was gone from Judah on his trip back to Shushan, the local people were carrying

on with their normal business on the Sabbath. ***Evil thing:*** Their working on the Sabbath was an evil act, an open violation of the sign that they had a covenant with God. In order to stop the Gentile merchants from doing their business in Jerusalem, they closed the gates of the city at sundown on Friday and did not open them again until after the Sabbath. What they did with the interior towns and villages, we are not told. But assuming that their actions in Jerusalem would set an example for the others, we assume that they did the same. ***I will lay hands on you:*** Nehemiah was going to become physical in carrying out the observance of the Sabbath. It seems that the merchants were more concerned over making a profit than honoring a Jewish Sabbath. It is interesting to note that Nehemiah did not reproach them for doing an evil thing by not honoring the Sabbath, but for tempting the Jews of the city to break the Sabbath. These merchants were from Tyre, and thus, not Jews. The Sabbath had no religious significance to them. And in the contexts, Nehemiah realized this. They were not guilty of breaking the Sabbath, for the Sabbath did not apply to them. It applied to Jews only, not to Gentiles. They were only the occasion for the Jews to be tempted to trade also on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a sign only between God and the Israelite nation, not a sign of a covenant between God and all mankind.

**13:23-31** The final restoration that Nehemiah made concerns the preservation of the Israelite nation. In order for it to be known that the Messiah came from

Israel in fulfillment of the promises of God, a nation of Israel had to be known to be in existence at the time of the coming of the Messiah. This is the context of what is stated in this text, and the context of Ezra 10. This explains the drastic measures that were taken by both Ezra and Nehemiah in correcting this problem in Israel at this time in their history. Since the return of the remnant from captivity was for the purpose of establishing again the Israelite community in Palestine, then that community must not lose its identity. ***I cleansed them from all foreigners:*** In order to preserve the identity of Israel in Palestine, all the foreigners had to go. Ezra had made the people commit to this, but by the time of Nehemiah's arrival, they had forgotten their commitment. It is always a strong cultural urge that people of different cultures who live together, to intermarry. This is a natural occurrence. But in relation to the purpose of God with the nation of Israel at this time in history, the identity of Israel in the promise land had to be maintained until the coming of the Messiah. When the Messiah came, there would be neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ (Gl 3:26-29). There are now no religious restraints in the eyes of God on who can marry whom of any culture.

### **Historical Epilogue**

The writing of Nehemiah and Malachi constitute the final inspired Scriptures that were dedicated to the history of Israel. There are only a few historical sources in reference to Jewish history from the time of the dedication of

the walls of Jerusalem to the time of Alexander the Great. However, from the time of Alexander to the time of Jesus, there is a great deal of history.

In 332 B.C., Alexander conquered the area of Palestine, which conquest ended over two centuries of Persian control. As with many other places that were conquered by Alexander, Hellenism was brought into the culture of the people. This was particularly true of the Greek language which Alexander took through-out his empire.

In 323 B.C., Alexander died. After his death, his generals waged war among themselves, and subsequently divided the Greek Empire into four regions, one constituting the area of Palestine. By 301 B.C. the Ptolemaic Dynasty, a Greek family that ruled in Egypt, had taken control of Judea. In 200 B.C., the Seleucid King Antiochus III conquered Judea. The Seleucids were of Greek origin and controlled Syria. Antiochus III followed the example of the Persians by giving religious freedom to his subjects. However, his successor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, reversed this policy, and subsequently brought great religious persecution on the Jews. (Some have suggested that he was the “contemptible person” that is mentioned in Daniel 11:21.)

Antiochus IV used Judea as a platform from which to launch his attacks against Egypt. However, in 168 B.C. his efforts were stopped. It was at this time that the suppressed Jews of Jerusalem seized the opportunity to rebel against the oppression of Antiochus. However, this rebellion was crushed and Antiochus in-

troducted pagan practices in Jerusalem and forbade the observance of Jewish feasts. In order to insult the Jews, in 167 B.C. Antiochus offered a pig, an unclean animal, upon the altar in Jerusalem. (Reference to this event is probably made in Daniel 11:31.) This action sparked a rebellion on the part of the Jews. This rebellion was led by a priest named Mattathias of the Hasmonean family, and subsequently began the Hasmonean period. There were five sons in the Mattathias family. Led by Mattathias, the Jews regained their religious freedom. In 164 B.C. the temple was cleansed and rededicated.

It was during the Hasmonean period that the Maccabees became prominent leaders for Jewish causes. They led in the victory over the Seleucids, and thus established themselves as the ruling family of the time. One of the sons of Mattathias, Judas Maccabeus, was prominent in this revolt.

In 163 and 162 B.C., Judas led other campaigns in order to deliver Jews who were suppressed in other regions of Palestine. The Maccabees, or Hasmoneans, became known as the defenders of the Jewish faith throughout this time, and thus gave rise to Jewish nationalism. The Seleucids sought to defeat the growing Jewish nationalism. However, in 161 B.C. the Hasmoneans signed an agreement with the Romans in order to gain their protection from the Seleucids. It was at this time that the empire of the Seleucids was coming apart. An irony of history was that the Seleucid Empire was disintegrating from within, and thus,

some within the royalty of the Seleucids asked the Hasmoneans for help. In return, the Jews were given religious freedom and national autonomy. But at the same time, the Seleucids gained control of much of the northern area of Palestine. But it was in 141 B.C. that the last Greek outpost was removed from Jerusalem, and thus the Jews were relieved from any taxation by the Seleucids.

It was at this time that there were significant territorial gains by the Jews throughout the area. John Hyrcanus I (135 - 104 B.C.) was known for his successful military campaigns against the Samaritans and Idumeans. He destroyed a Samaritan temple that was on Mt. Gerizim. He also conquered Shechem. The Jews allowed the conquered Idumeans to stay in their lands, but they had to be circumcised. In 104/103 B.C. Aristobolus, the son of John Hyrcanus, conquered Galilee. Alexander Jannaeus (103 - 76 B.C.) conquered the coastal territory of Palestine and much of the transjordan area. He was a cruel ruler, which resulted in dissension within the region. Jannaeus gave the rule of much of his territory to his wife, Salome. However, her reign was plagued with civil war between her two sons, Aristobolus II and Hyrcanus II.

The period of Hasmonean control of Palestine was the last period of history when the Jews had control of their own territory. The next time they gained such control was when Israel declared herself a state in 1948, which declaration and independence continues to this day.

Sometime between the end of

Nehemiah's governorship and the coming of Jesus the Sadducean priestly class of rich Jews developed. The Pharisees also came about during this period, though it is difficult to determine when they first became known as the Pharisees. The Sadducees were an aristocratic upper class of people. They had political interest, and subsequently became prominent in both politics and religion. The Pharisees developed as a reaction to the Sadducees. Their reaction to the compromising religious practices of the Sadducees led them to become very legalistic in reference to the law of God. The Pharisees thus gained the reputation for being the defenders of the law of God. By the time Jesus arrived, both the Sadducees and Pharisees were established in the religious and cultural environment of Palestine.

When the Jews signed an alliance with the Romans in order to defend themselves against the Seleucids, the invitation to the Romans eventually led to Roman control of Palestine. At the time the Hasmoneans were at the height of their power, the Roman Empire was growing. In 63 B.C. Pompey arrived in Jerusalem with Roman legions. Rome's conquest of the Jewish state was diplomatic. The Jews were allowed to maintain their own faith and carry on with their feasts. However, they were allowed to do so only if they remained loyal to Rome. The successor of Pompey, Gabinius, the governor of Syria from 57 to 55 B.C., sought to divide Palestine into five districts. But the effort sparked a violent reaction by the Jews, and thus the effort was termi-

nated. From the experience, however, the Romans realized that Palestine was a volatile region and Jewish nationalism was still alive.

In 39 B.C. Caesar Octavius, and the Roman Senate, appointed Herod the Great, to be the vassal king over Judea. He was a very cruel king. He believed that examples of punishment discouraged rebellion. One of his greatest feats was the restoration of the temple in 20 B.C. Jesus was born within two years before Herod's death in 4 B.C. After his death, Archelaus became the king of Judea. However, he was unable to maintain order in the region, and subsequently, Rome made Judea a Roman province and placed it directly under Roman rule. When Jesus began His ministry, Palestine was an occupied land that was controlled by Rome. It remained an occupied land by the Roman Empire until the fall of Rome in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

### Historical Lesson

Israel learned a great historical lesson from her cycle of rebellions and restorations. The nation had gone the route of one thousand years of repetitive rebellions and restorations by the time God allowed Babylon to take the final two tribes into captivity. They thus reaped the whirlwind of blowing against the will of God. The end result was captivity, both Assyrian (722/21 B.C.) and Babylonian (586 B.C.). And at the end of this history of turmoil, only a small remnant made their way back from captivity to resettle the promised land. They learned through this divine discipline something

that is best discovered in their attitude and actions in rebuilding the city of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. They brought forth fruits of repentance.

When Cyrus came to the throne of the Medo-Persian Empire in 538 B.C., Israel's woes were over in reference to being in foreign captivity for their sins. It was a time in 536 B.C. for God's people to start going home. Zerubbabel led an initial group of the remnants in 536 B.C. This was followed by Ezra's group in 457 B.C. And finally, Hanani came from Judah to Nehemiah in the palace of Shushan in Babylon with a report concerning the survivors of the captivity and the condition of the city of Jerusalem. The report was not good. The survivors were in great distress and reproach (Ne 1:3).

When Nehemiah heard this report, he "*sat down and wept and mourned for many days*" (Ne 1:4). He fasted and prayed. After confessing the rebellion of Israel – the reason for their disbursement among the nations – Nehemiah recounted before God His promise of their restoration to the promised land. God had promised, "*... if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them ... I will gather them from there [the land of their captivity], and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name*" (Ne 1:8,9).

Nehemiah subsequently went to Judah. In the middle of the night, and in the company of a few trusted friends, he surveyed the destruction of Jerusalem. He then presented his vision to the officials (Ne 2:17). After reassuring them that God

would be with them, he urged them, “*Let us rise up and build*” (Ne 2:18). What happened next is one of the most remarkable stories of history that is recorded in the Bible. It is a story of determination and accomplishment. It is a story that reaffirms how God made us. If we are united in our goals, nothing will be withheld from us which we determine to do (Gn 11:6).

What led up to the determination to rebuild during Nehemiah’s time, is a legacy of struggle and procrastination. Ezra, a contemporary of with Nehemiah, recorded that the rebuilding of the temple began many years before in the days of Cyrus (Ez 3:8-13; 5:16). However, opposition arose from the Samaritans who were dwelling in the land (Ez 4:1-5). The work subsequently ceased during the early reign of the Medo-Persian Darius (Ez 4:24). While work was idle, the people focused on their own living. They began to live comfortably while the city as a whole continued to lay in ruins (See Ez 1:9). God then sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to motivate the people to continue the reconstruction, which they did (Ez 4:24; 5:1ff). During the reign of Darius, reconstruction of the temple was completed in 515 B.C. (Ez 6:13-16). However, because of persistent opposition, work again ceased on reconstruction of the remainder of the city. It was not until the coming of Nehemiah in 444 B.C., over ninety years after the initial return of captives in 536 B.C., that work began in order to complete the remainder of the city. Because of Nehemiah’s inspirational leadership, it

was during the first year after his arrival to the city that the walls of twere eventually completed and a national revival in faith occurred among the Jews (Ne 12:27 - 13:31).

When Nehemiah first went to the promised land, his mission was to complete reconstruction of the city and to reform the spiritual life of the returnees. After he surveyed the ruins upon his arrival, he gave a stirring exhortation to the residents. The result of his exhortation was that “*they set their hands to do this good work*” (Ne 2:18). Against all opposition, they set themselves to the task of bringing into reality their dreams. It thus took a unique leader to arise when the time was right to stir a lethargic group into action.

However, when good things are about to happen, we cannot expect Satan to stand in applause in the cheap seats. Quite the opposite. The determined workers faced the opposition Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. Nehemiah said, “*They laughed us to scorn and despised us*” (Ne 2:19). So he answered their ridicule by encouraging the workers, “*The God of heaven Himself will prosper us*” (Ne 2:20). But the workers’ antagonists persisted. They mocked the zealous workers (Ne 4:1). “*What are these feeble Jews doing?*” (Ne 4:2). “*Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall*” (Ne 4:3). And so the opposition continued. There were continued threats. Continued ridicule. Slander. There was even a conspiracy to kill Nehemiah (Ne 6).

But through the continual encourage-

ment of Nehemiah, the determined workers persisted. They were able to persist against such great odds because of a spirit that Nehemiah generated in their hearts. That spirit was, "***The people had a mind to work***" (Ne 4:6). If they had not this spirit, they would certainly have succumbed to the tremendous opposition they faced during the reconstruction.

In Genesis 11 it is stated that God came down from heaven during the days when men sought to accomplish the misguided goal of building a tower whose top would reach even to the heavens. Though their goal and purpose was wrong, God made a statement about the nature of man which He had created: "... ***nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them***" (Gn 11:6). God created us with this nature. If we make a plan, establish a goal, have a united mind to work, nothing will be withheld from

us which we determine to do. As Christians, we are more than conquerors through the Lord (See Rm 8:31-37). We can do more than those who conquer (build) things of the world because God works in us "*to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us*" (Ep 3:20). Therefore, if men can accomplish great things on their own outside the plan of God, then God's people can do even greater when their plans are for His glory and to the accomplishment of His purposes. It is the task of the people of God to bring their plans into harmony with the eternal plan of God for the purpose of this world. The great lesson of Nehemiah was that as a leader he brought the people's desires and plans into harmony with the purpose of God to preserve the seed of David until the coming of the Messiah.