

THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL: EZRA & NEHEMIAH

Background - Israel's Decline & Captivity

We are beginning our class on "The Rebuilding of Israel" with a study of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Before we look at the text of these books, we shall spend this week's class on Israel's decline and captivity, which will set the stage for the events described by Ezra.

Introduction

We learn from several Old Testament books that after a period of general unity, peace, and prosperity in the time of David and Solomon, the Kingdom of Israel divided politically and also began a long period of spiritual decline. Eventually, God saw that there was no way to cure his people other than to allow them to be conquered by their enemies. The nation was overrun and largely destroyed by pagan armies, and most of the Jews were carried off as slaves or captives. Later, after God had purified and disciplined them, he brought them back home to begin the job of rebuilding the nation of Israel both physically and spiritually. They faced this challenge of doing the rebuilding while continuing to learn some important spiritual lessons.

The theme of rebuilding provides many practical lessons, both for individual Christians and for bodies of believers. Let us consider first what is implied in the word "rebuilding". The building that the Jews did during this period was of several kinds. They had to build the physical elements of their land - their homes, the temple, and so forth - since these had all been destroyed earlier by their enemies. They had to build spiritually, by re-establishing worship practices and by learning the spiritual lessons God was teaching them about their identity and purpose. They also had to build numerically, since their numbers had experienced a drastic decline since the days of independence and strength. And in all of this building, they had to rebuild, to get back to a place they had attained before, and then to be prepared to move ahead.

Consider the parallels in our lives and ministries. Many Christians go through periods of growth alternating with periods of discipline and struggle, which must often be followed by a time of rebuilding. So too, congregations of believers often experience this same pattern. There is no reason to be ashamed of this, and there is also no reason to feel that we should be exempt from this. There are many times when, like the ancient Jews, we have spiritual needs that God can only cure through discipline. There are also times when we must be "pruned", as Jesus teaches in John 15 - that is, there are times when we must apparently go backwards in human terms, in order for God to prepare us to move forwards. Sometimes the hardest part in rebuilding is the "re" - it can seem frustrating to redo something or relearn a lesson, but it is often God's plan.

God said through Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). Israel's rebuilding process revealed God's hand at work, and God's hand is also at work in our lives when we must rebuild.

Study Suggestion: Consider how the "rebuilding" theme might be of importance to you and to those around you. Keep in mind the various types of "building", and consider the possible reasons God may have to bring those he loves through a time of discipline and rebuilding before leading them on to something new.

Israel's Decline & Captivity

Israel had to rebuild because their nation had previously been conquered and destroyed. God allowed this to happen, because of some deep and otherwise incurable spiritual disorders. We have covered the history of this period in detail in previous courses, so here we shall make only a brief overview to refresh our minds about the most important events and ideas.

Israel became a kingdom in the 11th century BC. After the first king, Saul, was removed from his position by God, David led Israel into an era of prosperity and growth that continued into the reign of his son Solomon. Although there were some underlying problems during this era (partly the fruit of mistakes made by David and Solomon in their family lives), it was a period of outward strength. After Solomon's death, a crisis occurred. Rehoboam, Solomon's son, could have turned things around by discontinuing some of his father's practices, but chose not to. The rebel Jeroboam took advantage of this situation to lead the northern half of the nation away from the line of David, and the nation split into two rival kingdoms. This was in about 930 BC. It was no accident, but was from God, because of the idolatry and other evils into which Solomon led the nation through his infatuation with pagan women (1 Kings 11:26-40).

Each of these two kingdoms had a characteristic pattern of history. The Northern Kingdom (called either Samaria or Israel) was never faithful to God. Jeroboam introduced open idolatry as an approved practice, and after that every northern king was involved in or accepted some kind of false worship, and only one (the bloody reformer Jehu) made any attempt to clean the idols out of the kingdom. During its history, the north was led by thoroughly pagan rulers, several of whom gained power through rebellion and murder. The people of the north accepted this, caring only about whether their kings kept them prosperous.

The Southern Kingdom (usually called Judah, since that tribe contained the royal line) had periods of faithfulness, but never showed any long-term spiritual growth. Judah had more citizens who were faithful to God, and periodically a reformer king would institute a wide-scale program of repentance and turning to God. Judah had 20 kings, 4 of whom were reformers (Asa, Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah), but the rest ranged from good but weak kings to rulers who openly led the nation back into idolatry. This hopeless cycle went on for over 300 years, and God eventually gave them over to the Babylonians to be taken captive. The history of these two kingdoms from the division to the captivity is in 1 Kings 12-22 and 2 Kings. In Kings, the narrative goes back & forth between the two kingdoms. Chronicles follows only the history of Judah, the Southern Kingdom.

The Northern Kingdom lasted just about 200 years. In 722 BC, God gave them over to the growing Assyrian Empire, and the Assyrians ravaged the land and enslaved those who survived the fighting. In 2 Kings 17:7-41, we read about this event and the reasons for it. They were given over to their enemies because they worshiped other gods (verse 8) and rejected God's covenant (verse 15). We are told that "they followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless" (verse 15). After their fall, the Northern tribes ceased to have significance in the history of Israel. Most of the survivors who were allowed to remain in their homeland intermarried with the unbelievers who came to resettle the land (verses 24-42), producing the race known as the Samaritans.

The Southern Kingdom lasted for over a century longer, but it too fell. In 606 BC, a Babylonian army made a reconnaissance in force on the outskirts of Jerusalem, taking a good amount of plunder and a band of captives, including the future prophet Daniel and his three friends.

Another attack in 597 BC devastated the land and saw a much larger group of captives taken to Babylon, including the prophet Ezekiel. The end came in 586 BC, when Jerusalem was conquered and sacked, all but the old and weak were taken as captives to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:15-21), and Judah's independence came to an end. The Bible's account of the history of the final fall of Judah appears in 2 Kings 24-25 and 2 Chronicles 36. Again we see that the people reveled in following practices of other nations (2 Chronicles 36:14), and so they were given over to these other nations whom they so much wanted to be like. Life under Babylonian rule forced God's people to decide whether they wished to retain their identity as a chosen people, or whether they wished to blend in. Babylon was an idolatrous, corrupt, and often violent society. In the higher circles of society, there was more of an emphasis on learning and study, but with the understanding that it was done for the sake of the empire.

There were many spiritual disorders that led to the captivity, but the fundamental problems all occurred from the reluctance of God's people to embrace their special identity and purpose. They constantly wanted to be like other nations, and to copy the practices of other cultures. We can sympathize with their desires, since we too often find it demoralizing to have so many basic differences with those around us. And just as they felt that it was acceptable to adopt more and more of the ways of the world, so too that is always a grave temptation for God's people. Each generation of the church has its own set of particular struggles in the ways that it relates to the world. But if we can understand their mistake, we also must be careful not to fall into it. For it is this same mistake - the failure to appreciate or remember who we are - that leads to most of the periods of discipline that God must lead us into.

Study Suggestion: Read on your own the passages in Kings and Chronicles about the fall of the kingdoms of Israel. (There are many other significant references other than those listed in the notes.) What lessons do you see from their experience? How do they help us to understand what God wanted to do through the rebuilding?

God's Plans For the Captivity - Jeremiah's Prophecies

The prophet Jeremiah was a key part of God's plans for the captivity and rebuilding. Jeremiah prophesied about the coming captivity, giving God's people their last chance to avoid it. He himself had to live through the experience of seeing Jerusalem taken by the Babylonians, and then prophesied about God's plans for the future, when he would rebuild Israel through the captives' descendants. The three prophecies we shall study from Jeremiah will explain all of the important themes about the captivity.

Jeremiah first of all stressed that, while it was indeed an act of discipline, it was also an opportunity for a much-needed fresh start. In his image of the baskets of figs (Jeremiah 24), he told the captives that it was they, not the apparently luckier ones who were allowed to remain in their homes, who were blessed to be the seed of a new start. God would give them a chance to re-evaluate their priorities and perspectives in a foreign land. True, they would lack the security of living in a nation entirely made up of God's people, but they would also get a chance to escape the meaningless ritual and empty slogans into which their worship had deteriorated.

Jeremiah also stressed repeatedly that the exile would not be indefinite, but only for a fixed period. In Jeremiah 25:8-14 and again in 29:4-14, he specifies that the exile would be for seventy years. This time period corresponds to the years from the taking of the first Judean captives (606 BC) up to the fall of Babylon (538 BC), followed shortly by the Persians letting the Jews return to their homeland in (536 BC). The time of seventy years has the symbolic

significance of being 7 times 10, and it also worked well from the practical perspective, in that those who returned were almost a completely new people who had thrown off completely the spiritual hindrances that caused God to exile them.

As Judah's collapse was becoming clear, there were many false prophets who proclaimed that the trouble would pass quickly, and that God would surely deliver his people from the Babylonians. Jeremiah contradicted these liars and their popular but misguided messages. In chapter 27, he warns that it was God's hand that had given the nation to their enemies, and God's hand also would prevent his people from escaping this time. Even the great temple was to be broken up and carried off by the pagans. Jeremiah warned that destruction would befall anyone who listened to the false prophets and who tried to resist the Babylonians.

Jeremiah also sent a long letter of exhortation to those who been taken away captive (Jeremiah 29:1-23). He told them to settle down in Babylon, and live normal lives of faithfulness. He assured them that, although they could not count on the easy way out that the false prophets offered, everything was very much in God's hands, and that God's plans were to make them prosper, not to harm them (verse 11). The goal was to see them turn back to God (verses 12-14), and only then would it be time for the return and rebuilding.

Suggested References For Introductory Study of Old Testament History

Norman Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament*

Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquity of the Jews*

Werner Keller, *The Bible As History*

Lasor, Hubbard & Bush, *Old Testament Survey*

Basic Chronology Leading To The Fall Of Jerusalem

1010 BC	Approximate date that David became king.
930 BC	Israel splits into Northern and Southern Kingdoms. (This date used to be given as 975 BC. Improved research has shown that a date between 931 and 922 BC harmonizes better with the Bible and history.)
722 BC	Assyria conquers the Northern Kingdom.
628 BC	Josiah's reforms begin (Southern Kingdom), the last attempt to halt spiritual decline. Kingdom around. Jeremiah's ministry began about the same time.
606 BC	First Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem - Daniel and his three friends are among those taken to Babylon.
597 BC	Second Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem - Ezekiel is among those taken captive in this invasion.
586 BC	Jerusalem falls in third Babylonian invasion.

Chronology Of Events Connected With Ezra & Nehemiah

553 BC	Cyrus II "the Great" becomes ruler of Persia.
538 BC	Babylonian Empire is conquered by the Medes and Persians, under Cyrus.
536 BC	Cyrus decrees that the Jews may return, 70 years after the first captives taken.
535 BC	Reconstruction on the temple is abandoned shortly after it begins.
522 BC	Darius I Hystaspes becomes ruler of Persia, succeeding Cyrus's son Cambyses, who reigned 529-522 BC. (Note: this is not Darius the Mede from Daniel 6.)
520 BC	Haggai & Zechariah exhort the people to rebuild the temple.

- 516 BC Temple construction completed.
- 490 BC Persia invades Greece, but is halted at the decisive battle of Marathon.
- 486 BC Xerxes ("Ahasuerus" in some O.T. versions) succeeds Darius as ruler of Persia.
- 480 BC Persia again threatens to conquer Greece, but is stopped at Salamis.
- 478 BC Esther marries Xerxes and becomes Queen of Persia.
- 465 BC Xerxes is assassinated by his guards, and succeeded by his son Artaxerxes I.
- 458 BC Ezra's reforms and teachings.
- 444 BC Nehemiah (Artaxerxes' cupbearer) comes to Jerusalem and leads wall rebuilding.
- 431 BC The Peloponnesian War breaks out in Greece. This wasteful and foolish war, which lasted until 404 BC, had many repercussions in ancient secular history.
- 420 BC Approximate date that O.T. is completed, with writing of the book of Malachi.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2001

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THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, CONTINUED: THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Notes For Part One: Nehemiah Comes to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:1-2:10)

Last week we concluded the book of Ezra. This time, we shall move on to the book of Nehemiah, which takes place not long after the end of Ezra. In Nehemiah, we shall see the people tackle another important rebuilding project, and we shall also see both Ezra and Nehemiah institute further spiritual reforms.

Nehemiah's Prayer For Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1)

About a dozen years after the end of Ezra, God called Nehemiah to initiate another step in the rebuilding of Israel. Although much rebuilding of Jerusalem and Israel had already taken place, the city walls were still in ruins. This was an important part of a city, both symbolically and practically, and the first several chapters of the book deal with the rebuilding of the walls. In this first chapter, we see Nehemiah's prayer when he learns that the walls are still in ruins.

Before we start with chapter one, here is a brief overview of the book of Nehemiah:

Nehemiah 1-2 - Nehemiah Comes to Jerusalem
Nehemiah 3-7 - Rebuilding the City Walls
Nehemiah 8-10 - Ezra & the Ministry of the Law
Nehemiah 11-13 - Further Plans & Reforms

The book begins in about 445 BC, when Nehemiah learns about the ruined walls of Jerusalem (1:1-4). That Jerusalem's walls were still not rebuilt, nearly 100 years now after the initial return, stuck Nehemiah as distressing and frightening. An ancient city's walls were important for defense and prestige, and were an essential part of any city. Given how vital they were, it is unlikely that no attempt had yet been made to rebuild them; it is much more likely that the Jews had started them at some point, only to encounter the same kind of fierce opposition that had delayed other rebuilding projects. From the descriptions in 1:3 and 2:13, it is possible that such an attempt had been made not long before, only to have been put down with force (see also Ezra 4:12 and 4:16).

After his initial distress, Nehemiah fasted and prayed (1:5-11). Both Ezra and Nehemiah are a convicting reminder to us of the importance of taking our troubles to God before we talk about them to others or begin to enact our own plans. Nehemiah begins his prayer by confessing the sins (verses 5-7) of himself and his people - like Ezra before him, he accepts the responsibility even though he himself had done nothing wrong. He then expresses his assurance in God's promises (verses 8-9), and petitions God for success in his resolve to initiate the rebuilding of the walls (verses 10-11). Like Ezra's prayer in Ezra 9, this prayer gives us both an example and a challenge to consider when we too face discouragements or worries.

Study Suggestion: Compare Nehemiah's prayer here with Ezra's prayer in Ezra 9. Take note of both the things they prayed about and the ways that they prayed. Then consider what situations in our experience would parallel their concerns, and study how we can apply their prayers and perspectives in our own experience.

Nehemiah's Commission From the King (Nehemiah 2:1-10)

After Nehemiah's prayerful preparation, God provided him with an ideal opportunity to initiate the rebuilding of the walls. King Artaxerxes responds favorably to Nehemiah's request that he be allowed to go to Jerusalem, and because Nehemiah had carefully thought through all of the things that would be needed for the project, the king himself provides what Nehemiah asks for.

Nehemiah held the position of cupbearer to the king (2:1-2, see also 1:11). This was a position of great privilege, and was only given to someone whom the king trusted deeply. There had been several assassinations or attempted assassinations in recent Persian history, and the kings of the era had to have implicit trust in their close servants, whom they in turn would reward generously if they deserved it. But this was also a position of great responsibility. Any lack of faithfulness could meet with severe punishment. From God's perspective, he also considered that Nehemiah's position meant he had great spiritual responsibilities, which Nehemiah accepted.

Nehemiah goes before King Artaxerxes in a mood of obvious sorrow - which could have been grounds for punishment by Persian law - and when the king notices this, he makes a request (2:3-5), which we soon see has been carefully thought out beforehand. Nehemiah begins with an honest appraisal of the situation in Jerusalem, not hiding his real purpose. And even as he speaks to the king, he also remembers to pray (verse 4), relying completely on God to guide him in this important conversation. He then asks for permission to go to Jerusalem himself. Nehemiah's request is notable for its honesty and openness, and for his reliance on God. If he could demonstrate these qualities before a mighty monarch, we also can learn to put these into practice in our own interactions with unbelievers.

With the king's permission, it was then a matter of working out the details (2:6-9). Although the king's permission was the key step, it was also vitally important for Nehemiah to know what he would need, and to be able to answer the king accurately. The whole approach of Nehemiah to the problem of the city walls demonstrates how to rely on God while at the same time accepting the responsibility of being prepared for ministry. Nehemiah allows God to guide him, while at the same time thinking through how to go about the project. The result is that once more a monarch provides help, including letters of commission and other practical forms of assistance, to a project of spiritual importance.

At the same time, even before Nehemiah gets underway, there is already a hint of the future opposition he will face (2:10). No matter how well-intentioned we are, no matter how genuinely reliant we are on God, no matter how well-prepared we are to conduct the ministry of the gospel, there will never be a time when the rest of the world will stop putting obstacles and discouragements in our way. Fortunately, Nehemiah knew this, and when the opposition came, he would be ready for it.

Study Suggestion: Go back through what we have studied in Nehemiah so far, and list all of the things that Nehemiah did (or did not do) after he heard about the needs in Jerusalem. In what ways did he show reliance on God? In what ways did he take responsibility and initiative? How can you apply these things to your own life and ministry?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2001*

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THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, CONTINUED: THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Notes For Part Two: Work on the Walls Begins (Nehemiah 2:11-3:32)

Last week we began the book of Nehemiah, with Nehemiah laying the plans for the important project of rebuilding the city walls of Jerusalem. This time, we shall see Nehemiah arrive in Jerusalem and begin the actual work.

Nehemiah Arrives & Inspects the Walls (Nehemiah 2:11-20)

Last time, we saw how Nehemiah learned that the walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins, and how God led him to go to Jerusalem to lead the work. Nehemiah now arrives in Jerusalem, and before beginning the work he makes a thorough inspection of the walls and gates as they were. Even at this preliminary stage, he must deal with the kind of opposition that was an obstacle throughout the rebuilding of Israel.

Like Ezra, Nehemiah took a short break of three days after the end of the long journey, and then set to work. Setting out during the night (2:11-12), he began an inspection of the walls. It is interesting that he chose to exercise such secrecy at this point in his mission. Although Nehemiah knew that God has chosen him to lead this rebuilding project, he was aware that he was a newcomer, and did not choose immediately to exert his authority. Rather, he wanted to become fully informed of the situation before he starts to direct the rebuilding.

He conducts a thorough and careful inspection of the exact situation of the walls (2:13-16). This passage mentions several specific locations along the wall, showing that Nehemiah did not simply go to one stretch of the wall and then assume he knew all about it, but rather that he took the time to look all around the wall. He still had not yet at this point explained what he is doing to anyone in Jerusalem, but now he has detailed first-hand information as to exactly what work needs to be done. Nehemiah has showed us already that he knows how to size up a situation and plan out many of the details once he knows that God wants him to act.

After studying the problem, Nehemiah meets with the community's priests and leaders, and delivers an exhortation to rebuild the walls (2:17-18). He urges them to settle no longer for the weak position that Jerusalem was in. Although they most likely had made earlier attempts to rebuild the walls, which were probably frustrated by opposition and intimidation, Nehemiah implores them this time to make a commitment to the work that will be sufficient to overcome any opposition. He also details for them what God had already done in using the king to supply him with what would be needed for the job. And, just as Ezra's example alone convicted the community of sin in Ezra 10, so here Nehemiah's confidence and conviction persuades the people to rebuild the walls, without any lengthy resistance. In fact, the people are eager to start once they listen to what Nehemiah says. Their sudden commitment and their humble willingness to listen to a newcomer speak well for Nehemiah's preparation, and also for their willingness to take advantage of the opportunity for a fresh start.

By now, it should be no surprise to us that, as soon as the decision was made to rebuild the walls,

opposition to the project began (2:19-20). We have already met Sanballat and Tobiah (2:10), and shall have to deal with these two characters throughout the book of Nehemiah. Although our flesh does not want to hear it, there are always Sanballats and Tobiahs in the world who are frightened and threatened by the ministry of the gospel. They won't stop trying to interfere with our work, and when they themselves fail, their master Satan will try himself. But we can still be confident because of God, as Nehemiah re-emphasizes in verse 20. As John wrote, "you, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Study Suggestion: What did Nehemiah accomplish by his thorough study of the ruined walls? How did it help when he met with the people? How did it prepare him to meet opposition? Make a list of everything Nehemiah has done to date, and consider ways in which he provides an example for our own ministries.

The Builders of the Walls (Nehemiah 3)

This entire chapter consists of a list of names of those persons who worked on different portions of the project, along with the parts of the walls that they helped to restore. Once again, behind an apparently dry list of names and locations there are several significant spiritual lessons. There are some practical lessons and also some encouraging examples for us to remember.

In simply surveying the list of builders and sites in Nehemiah 3, we notice the many different names that were involved in the rebuilding, and we notice the detail with which the work is described. The exact locations of each work site are given, and many of these locations can be pin-pointed precisely on a map of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's description starts at what was then the northeast corner of the city, and then proceeds counter-clockwise.

There are a number of general observations we can make on the lessons that are held by this list. We see that there was indeed a job for everyone, with all types of persons mentioned: from laborers and smiths to priests and Levites, and with sons and daughters often working alongside their parents. They worked together, which is emphasized by Nehemiah's method of description. The city wall would be only as effective as its weakest point, and Nehemiah stresses how each part of the work fit together with the next part. Both the individual builders and the work that they did were part of a greater whole. And the whole work left a testimony for the future. Over 2400 years later, these names are still preserved for us as an example of diligence and spiritual building. Our own efforts will likewise be remembered and appreciated by God, even if they may be ignored by the world.

Study Suggestion: We have noted several reasons why Nehemiah preserved for us the list of builders and the sites they worked on. How can these give you encouragement to proceed with faith and diligence in the ministries to which God has called you? What other purposes, besides those we have mentioned, might be served by the list of names and places?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2001*

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THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, CONTINUED: THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Notes For Part Three: Problems & Opposition (Nehemiah 4-5)

The work on the city walls proceeded with diligence, but that does not mean it went without any trouble. Sanballat and Tobiah instigated a series of attempts to derail the rebuilding, and even from within the community there were problems that arose and threatened the work in a different way. Both the problems themselves and Nehemiah's leadership are useful practical examples.

Dealing With Opposition (Nehemiah 4)

No matter how earnestly the Jews pursued the rebuilding, they were never free from the opposition of those who are threatened by their work. Their enemies tried a variety of methods, gradually stepping up the intensity. But Nehemiah was never surprised, and was ready for each attempt. Indeed, he knew all along that the discouragement and constantly wearying opposition were at least as great an obstacle to rebuilding the walls as was the purely physical part of the job. If we follow his example, if we place our confidence in God and learn not to allow opposition to take us by surprise, we too can overcome it through God's strength.

Sanballat and Tobiah show up again, trying to use ridicule to slow down the work (4:1-3). Their insults are hardly very clever, but this type of crude verbal attack had probably worked before. We know from our own experience that insults and ridicule can be very effective in causing us to doubt what we are doing, and in making us insecure. When faced with such behavior, we often find it easiest simply to change our behavior to make the ridicule stop.

Nehemiah's response is significant (4:4-6). He does not stop to question what he is doing, or to wonder whether the wall is really as pathetic as his enemies are saying it is. He asks God to "turn their insults back on their own heads", since he knows that their insults reflect on them, not on him or God's people. So too we need to remember that those who ridicule Christian beliefs or practices are not doing so out of strength, but out of weakness. The ridicule of infidels and pagans does not mean that we are doing anything wrong, but rather it is an indication of the tremendous emptiness and insecurity in their hearts. And so the work proceeded. In large part, the insults failed because the people were now working together. It was no longer the case of a few isolated persons trying to rebuild on their own, and thus being easily discouraged, but of a whole community working together and supporting each other.

Their enemies thus turned to more serious attempts (4:7-15). Their threats of force came at a time when the people's strength was beginning to give out, as they started to realize just how much difficult work was ahead. It will often happen that Satan pulls out his strongest weapons when we are at our weakest, and we need to be ready for it. Nehemiah responds with some very practical precautions (see below), but most importantly of all he exhorts them to "remember the Lord". Holding on to their faith was even more important than taking practical steps.

As the work continues (4:16-23), we see some of the steps that Nehemiah took. His main precaution was assigning half of the men to stand guard while the rest worked. This slowed down the work, but it made sure that it could continue in peace. He also instilled a spirit of alertness, so that the workers were ready to respond to threats at all times. It is significant that Nehemiah combines faith with practical wisdom. The two are not at all in opposition - there are

times when the ways that God protects us is by showing us the ways he wants us to watch out for ourselves and for each other.

Study Suggestion: Consider the parallels in our own experience with the kinds of problems that Nehemiah and the people faced here. Who are our Sanballats and Tobiahs? What tactics do they use? How does Nehemiah's example teach us to respond to them?

Dealing With Internal Problems (Nehemiah 5)

Any great ministry will face the threat of problems from within. When the ineffective attempts by the Sanballats and Tobiahs of the world fail to disrupt us, Satan himself will intervene with more dangerous methods. Here, Nehemiah discovered that some persons from within the community were thinking up ways of turning the wall rebuilding to their own advantage. Even God's people are still weak and subject to temptation, and we must learn to keep an eye out for the types of problems such as Nehemiah now describes.

A number of internal problems arose (5:1-5), largely due to the strains of the rebuilding. While everyone knew that the wall rebuilding would take sacrifice, for some it started to be too much. The economizing measures necessitated to finance such a project eventually meant that many families had to take out loans just to eat. Unfortunately, some of the wealthier members of the community made matters worse by taking the others' property and freedom as collateral, and by charging interest.

Nehemiah responds quickly once he hears the charges (5:6-13). He was well aware that the project would involve hardships for the people, but he did not expect them to start exploiting each other. The charge of usury was a serious one, and he spares neither their feelings nor their bank accounts in his instructions on dealing with the situation, demanding that they make the situation right and give back all that they had taken. The people who had thus erred respond eagerly, and agree to his terms. Once again, we have a positive example of repentance, and that is what we should remember them for. We are all prone to temptation, and many of us fall into the same trap of exploiting others' misfortunes - whether for financial profit, or for the thrill of gossip and titillation, it is the same thing. But what is admirable is how quickly these persons repented when confronted with their error. May we always respond this quickly when we see our mistakes.

We also see Nehemiah's noteworthy personal example (5:14-19). We see that the king had appointed him governor (verse 14), and yet he did not take advantage of many of the privileges he could have enjoyed. He waived his rights for the sake of the example it set, and in order to use everything he had to serve God and carry out his will.

Study Suggestion: What temptations do we face that would be similar to the internal problems that Nehemiah had to confront here? How can we recognize the signs of these kinds of problems? How does Nehemiah's response help us to deal with them when they arise?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2001*

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THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, CONTINUED: THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Notes For Part Four: Work on the Walls Concludes (Nehemiah 6-7)

Last time, we saw how Nehemiah and the people had to deal with the opposition and problems that threatened to derail the rebuilding. And there were still more attempts to come, but eventually the walls were finished. This week we shall see the concluding stages of this project.

More Opposition (Nehemiah 6:1-14)

The opponents of the rebuilding were not yet ready to give up. We learn here about still more of the ways they tried to derail the rebuilding. Humans can be quite creative when they are trying desperately to get their way or are indulging their fleshly desires. Like Sanballat and Tobiah, most of them just won't admit when they are wrong, regardless of how clear God makes it. But once again, Nehemiah is ready for their tricks, and nothing will stop the rebuilding now.

Sanballat and Tobiah, joined again by Geshem, now try another scheme (6:1-4). Realizing the importance of Nehemiah's example and leadership, they target him personally this time. They first try a crude stratagem, inviting him to come out and join them in a place of their choosing, a town on the plain of Ono. There he would be vulnerable to the attack they were planning. But Nehemiah is not fooled, and spends little time arguing with them. He simply tells them that the work he is doing is too important to run off on a foolish errand, even if there had not been danger involved. So too, we should strive to shrug off the crude attempts of the world to get us to join them on their ground and in their habits. The world may use more subtle methods, but it often tries to lure us into places just as dangerous as Ono. Note that Nehemiah did not make the mistake of just going where they wanted him to and hoping that God would take care of him. In this case, no possible constructive purpose would have been served by meeting these hard-hearted and hard-headed characters, and Nehemiah wasted little time in saying no.

Next, these three malignant clowns turn back to political threats (6:5-9). To a large degree, their lame accusations are just a rehash of old material, claiming that the wall rebuilding was the prelude to a revolt or uprising. Nehemiah calmly exposes their weakness, telling them that all of their conspiracy theories, like most such theories that crackpots come up with in any era, were all in their head. The campaign to frighten the Jews with accusations of rebellion or political upheaval got less and less effective as the rebuilding proceeded.

Yet Sanballat and company were not done yet, and made still more attempts to derail the rebuilding (6:10-14). Their last attempts went back to focusing on Nehemiah himself. They tried both to harm him and also to use the threat of physical harm to discredit him, hoping to make him look fearful or cowardly. They also employed false prophets in a vain attempt to intimidate or discourage Nehemiah. They were quite creative in concocting ways to stop the rebuilding (as Romans says, "they invent ways of doing evil"), but none of it worked.

Study Suggestion: What new tactics do the opponents of the rebuilding try in this chapter? How are their methods similar to things that you and other Christians face today? How does Nehemiah's response to them help us contend with the world's opposition to our ministries?

The Wall is Completed (Nehemiah 6:15-7:73)

Finally the walls were done, in spite of the fact that the opposition continued up to the very end. In this chapter we see the final stages of the project, and the effect that the completion of the work had. Nehemiah also takes some further precautions against possible trouble. The wall rebuilding was accomplished in a remarkably short time, in the face of many obstacles.

After the many adventures he has encountered, Nehemiah can finally announce that the wall is finished (6:15-19). This huge project was completed in a working time of only 52 days, and it had been only six months since Nehemiah had first heard of the problem back in Persia. It's quite an example of how quickly things can change in our lives and ministries when we seek and follow God's will. Most of the Jews had lived all of their lives in the discouraging awareness that the walls remained unbuilt, and in just a short time the situation has changed completely.

That did not mean that all trouble was now in the past. Discouraged and angry that the rebuilding has succeeded, their enemies look for new ways to cause trouble. Tobiah, in particular, begins a malicious letter-writing campaign with the Jewish leaders, in an attempt to discredit and intimidate Nehemiah. We also see a revealing problem that now comes out. Many of the Jewish leaders had conflicting loyalties, having close ties with Tobiah and his family that clouded their judgment. With "leaders" like these, it is no wonder the walls had sat in ruins so long without being rebuilt.

Nehemiah does not simply rest upon the completion of the wall, but institutes a series of further actions to consolidate what has been done and to plan for the future (7:1-5). The new wall and gates allowed the appointment of gatekeepers and others who would fulfill responsibilities along the wall. Nehemiah also gives instructions to his brother Hanani (through whom he had first learned about the walls - 1:2) and to the faithful Hananiah, calling them to look after the defense and protection of the city. Finally, Nehemiah looks to the future, planning an assembly and registration to assist in the future organization of the still sparsely-populated city.

As Nehemiah is taking this step, he finds the record of exiles who had returned in 536 BC, over 90 years before (7:6-73). This list is remarkably similar to Ezra 2, and the small differences are usually understood to have arisen from copying errors that occurred in non-inspired documents that the two writers referred to when compiling their accounts. Nehemiah immediately realizes the importance of this list, which reminded the people of those who had gone before them in beginning the rebuilding, and which also was an encouraging reminder that God had fulfilled his promises to this earlier generation, just as he had to them.

Study Suggestion: What lessons do we learn from the completion of the wall rebuilding (either new ones from these verses, or overall lessons)? Consider, in particular, what parallels in our own lives and ministries we might be able to find to the wall rebuilding. What is the significance of the actions Nehemiah took upon completion of the wall? What kinds of challenges did he anticipate in the future, now that the wall was done?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2001

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(Originally taught as Lesson Ten of a series on the Rebuilding Of Israel)

THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, CONTINUED: THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Notes For Part Five: Ezra, Nehemiah, & The Law (Nehemiah 8-10)

With the walls rebuilt, it was time to turn once again to spiritual rebuilding. These next three chapters in Nehemiah re-acquaint us with Ezra, and tell us about his ministry of the law. He and Nehemiah worked together to re-instill a devotion to the law amongst the people.

Ezra Teaches the Law (Nehemiah 8)

The teaching, study, and application of the law had long been neglected by God's people, and the time had come for Ezra (whose qualifications we learned about in the book of Ezra) to guide the process of re-acquainting the community with the law and with its most important applications. This chapter describes the first steps in this important ministry, and they also provide us with several good principles to use in our own efforts to learn the Word of God.

The people were called to assemble together for the reading of the law (8:1-8). The assembly took place on the first day of the seventh month, the date of the Feast of Trumpets (see Leviticus 23:23-25). This would be sometime in September on our calendar. This holy day was originally a solemn assembly to prepare the people for the other fall holy days, but by the time of the return from exile it had taken on a different significance. By then, the beginning of the new Jewish civil year had been moved to this date (now the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah).

The people assembled at the Water Gate, which is in the oldest part of Jerusalem, towards the northeast portion of the City of David. There the people listened as Ezra read aloud to them from the Law of Moses (that is, the first five books of our Old Testament). The people listened attentively, and Ezra had taken steps to make sure that they also would understand what they learned. Several Levites were there to help explain the law (verses 7-8) so that it would not be simply an empty ritual or short-lived experience.

The people showed by their response that they understood the teachings that they heard (8:9-12). They wept because it revealed so many things in God's will that they had not been observing or respecting. And yet, Nehemiah and the Levites did not want the people to remain sad, but exhorted them to rejoice. God would not punish them again for the sins they had committed in ignorance, but instead wanted them to appreciate that at last the learning and study of the law would be restored. So they took heart in understanding the words of God, and they also found an immediate application, as the time was near to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (8:13-18). It had been many years since this feast had been observed with such devotion. Let all of this be an example, if you have been remiss in your own study of the Word! God does not want you to punish yourself in an attempt to make up for your past negligence, but would prefer that you instead channel your energy into a renewed devotion to his Word.

Study Suggestion: Make note of all of the things that Ezra and Nehemiah did and said to help the people learn the Law. How can each of these things help us in our study and application of the Scriptures?

Confession & Commitment (Nehemiah 9-10)

As they became acquainted with the Law, the people realized more and more how many sins they and their ancestors had committed, and in how many ways they had violated God's law, both willfully and out of ignorance. These two chapters describe how they confessed their sins and pledged to live in the future as God called them to do. Once again, we see a valuable example for us to follow at those times when we must rededicate ourselves to learning and obeying the Word of God.

Later in the seventh month, after the fall holy days were over, the people gathered together in a demonstration of repentance (9:1-4). They read from the law for several hours, and then spent several more hours confessing their sins. These were accompanied with other indications of penitence, such as wearing of sackcloth and putting dust on their heads.

The Levites then led a prayer of confession (9:5-37). They spent much of the prayer in giving lavish praise to God, first for his creation (verses 5-6) and his call of Abraham and his descendants (verses 7-8). They then praised God for some of the many things he did through the years in caring for his people, while acknowledging that all the while the people constantly demonstrated stiff-necked and rebellious behavior (verses 10-31). The prayer closes with an acknowledgment of their complete dependence on God, their need for his forgiveness and forbearance, and their need for his help in building them back up (verses 32-37).

Motivated by this prayer, the people make a binding agreement between themselves and God (9:38-10:39). The agreement is sealed by the leaders, who accept responsibility for its terms, but all of the people also bind themselves to follow the law of God. They made many specific promises, most of which focused on promising to remain holy (verses 30-31), promising to support the house of God (verses 32-34, 39) and promising to bring first-fruits and tithes as called for by the law (verses 35-39). All of these things that they committed themselves to have important spiritual parallels for Christians, and these chapters are worthy of careful consideration. They are not intended to provide a literal pattern for the way that the church tells its members what to do, but rather they are a valuable example of some important spiritual themes. The general pattern of learning, acknowledgment, confession, and commitment is a good one to follow.

Study Suggestion: What spiritual parallels are there to the steps taken in chapters 9 and 10? That is, how can the principles taught in the prayer in chapter 9, and the agreement in chapter 10, be applied in the context of New Testament Christianity?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2001

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(Originally taught as Lesson Eleven of a series on the Rebuilding Of Israel)

THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, CONTINUED: THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Notes For Part Six: Nehemiah's Further Reforms (Nehemiah 11-13)

When the walls had been completed, Ezra and Nehemiah led the people in re-instituting the reading and teaching of the law, as we studied in chapters 8-10. These last three chapters tell us of several further steps taken by Nehemiah to strengthen the people spiritually.

Repopulating Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:1-12:26)

Nehemiah had mentioned earlier (in Nehemiah 7:4-5) the need to build up Jerusalem's population. He knew that the small group that had come there directly was not strong enough to make the city the center of life and worship that it was meant to be. Nehemiah had earlier begun work on a plan to beef up Jerusalem's population, and here we see how his plan worked.

Two groups came to resettle in Jerusalem (11:1-4a). The leaders came voluntarily, while among all the other families one in ten was chosen by lot. Most were from Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, the tribes of the Southern Kingdom at the time of the exile. Nehemiah records a list of their names (11:4b-36). By now we know that these kinds of lists preserve the names of the actual persons who participated in an important event to emphasize the reality of what we read, and also to call them as witnesses for future generations of what God did in their day. In this chapter, the numbers are also helpful in establishing the size of rebuilt Jerusalem. Next, there are also lists of some of the towns that now had been populated by the returned exiles (starting in verse 25), showing that the people now covered a considerable territory.

Nehemiah also reviews the past when he gives an account of priests and Levites in successive generations (12:1-26). Conscious of the great debt owed to those who began the rebuilding over 90 years earlier, he recognizes first the original generation of Levites who had come back to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel. Then he moves ahead to list the heads of priestly families in more recent eras. Nehemiah knew that the significance of the Levitical priesthood lay not in the individual priests, but in the way that the same privileges and responsibilities were always passed on and practiced from generation to generation. We should carefully consider his perspective in our role as priests of a New Covenant.

Dedication of the Wall (Nehemiah 12:27-47)

These verses describe the ceremony that Nehemiah instituted to dedicate the now completed wall. It was not done immediately after the wall was completed, and was not a requirement of God. But it was a good way to emphasize some important basic lessons about the wall: that the wall had been built by God, and it belonged to God. For the dedication, the Levites in the surrounding regions came to Jerusalem (12:27-30). After purifying themselves, they purified the wall and its gates, and also purified the people, in preparation for the ceremony. For the wall to be dedicated - given to God, made holy - it needed first to be made clean and pure.

The dedication ceremony (12:31-43) holds several points of interest. The participants were primarily leaders and singers. There were two processions along the wall, one going in each direction. (The Hebrew is ambiguous as to whether the processions moved alongside the wall or on top of it - both would have been possible.) These processions recall Nehemiah's earlier inspection tour of the wall at night, and also his description of the points of the wall and the persons who rebuilt them. Walking all around the wall reminded everyone of all that went into

rebuilding it, and was followed by sacrifices and rejoicing, to celebrate what God had done for them and through them. At this time, Nehemiah also took steps for the future, appointing men to be in charge of the storerooms, finances, and other important responsibilities (12:44-47).

Further Reforms (Nehemiah 13)

The last chapter discusses several further reforms instituted by Nehemiah, all with the goal of keeping the people pure and holy. The need for these reforms also helps us to see some of the reasons why the rebuilding had reached a relative standstill before Nehemiah's arrival. While we must use caution in applying these examples, focusing on the themes instead of on specific details, they nevertheless hold some important lessons for our own ministries.

One specific thing that Nehemiah had to deal with was a cozy arrangement that his old adversary Tobiah had made with the priest Eliashib (13:1-9). Nehemiah had returned for a time to Persia (understandably, given his position of trust there), and Tobiah, always looking for opportunities for mischief, seized the chance to regain some of his lost influence over the Jews. He got the priest to let him use one of the temple storerooms, which was diverted from its normal use so that Tobiah could put his own things there. This was wrong for several reasons - besides the obvious ones, verses 1-2 remind us that Tobiah was an Ammonite and not permitted in the temple area at all - but the priest proved too weak to refuse him. It fell to Nehemiah to eject Tobiah and his belongings, and then to purify the room before it resumed its normal usage.

On his return, Nehemiah also learned that support for the Levites had fallen off while he had been away (13:10-14), to the extent that the Levites were having to maintain their own fields, instead of being supported by offerings and sacrifices as the law prescribed. Nehemiah restored the correct practices, and selected some trustworthy persons to see that the house of God was not neglected in the future. He also found that the Sabbath was being observed improperly (13:15-22), with many of God's people openly involved in commerce on the one day when they were told not to pursue their own interests. Nehemiah took several steps, even to closing the city gates on the Sabbath so that loads could not be carried in and out. These steps enabled the people to return to keeping the Sabbath in holiness, thus living up to their own holy identity.

Finally, an old problem resurfaced (13:23-31). Nehemiah discovered that many Jews, even among the leaders, had again married women from the idolatrous Canaanite tribes, and many of the children of these marriages were being overtly brought up in Canaanite fashion. Nehemiah is less sensitive than Ezra (look at verse 25!), since now it was not a case of a long neglected teaching, but of a problem that had been firmly addressed only a few years earlier.

Study Suggestions: The events in these chapters all have useful spiritual parallels for New Testament Christians. For each of the events in these last three chapters, answer the following: (i) What spiritual principles do they illustrate? (that is, what do they show about God, or about what he wants from his people, or about what he does or does not like, &c); (ii) What situations in our own experience would parallel the same spiritual principles?; (iii) What lessons do we learn from Nehemiah's handling of these situations that we can apply ourselves? (Usually this will be in a broader sense, not necessarily following the same details.)

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2001*

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