George Philip Bible Readings
Book of Nehemiah

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1:1.-3
1:1-3
1:4-11
1:4-11
2:1-3
2:4
2:5-8
2:9-10
2:11-16
2:17-20
2:17-20
3:1-5
3:6-16
3:17-32
4:1-6
4:7-9
4:10-14
4:15-23
4:15-23
5:1-5
5:6-13
5:6-13
5:14-19
6:1-4
6:1-4
6:5-9
6:10-14
6:15-19
6:15-19
7:1-4
7:5-73
7:5-73
8:1-3
8:1-3
8:4-8
8:4-8
8:9-12
8:9-12
8:13-18
9:1-5
9:6-8
9:9-15
9:16-25
9:16-25
9:26-31
9:32-37
9:32-37
9:38-10:31
9:38-10:31
9:38-10:31
10:32-39
10:32-39
10:32-39
11:1-18
11:1-18
11:1-18
11:19-36
11:19-36
12:1-26
12:27-30
12:31-43
12:31-43
12:44-47
13:1-3
13:1-3
13:4-9
13:4-9
13:10-14
13:10-14
13:15-22
13:15-22
13:23-29
13:23-29
13:30-31
13:30-31

1:1.-3

The story of Nehemiah begins when he hears in the Persian palace in Susa from travellers home from Jerusalem that the "revival" work in the city of God had run into terrible trouble. Note, of course, that Nehemiah asked questions about Jerusalem, and this indicates that over the years he had been a man who prayed for God's work even though at that time he could not actually be involved in it. It was the man who had prayed because he cared who was to be the man called by God to lead the rescue operation. We cannot tell how much contact Nehemiah had had with Ezra. He could have been a "prayer partner". We cannot tell how much actual and dependable news about Jerusalem was reaching Susa and the rest of Persia. Perhaps they had heard something of the serious and costly happenings recorded in the closing chapters of the story of Ezra. Perhaps Nehemiah had been praying earnestly that the new "consecration" under Ezra's leadership would be confirmed and consolidated in a significant new development of the work of God. There is much we do not know, but one thing is clear. There was a man of God who prayed for the people and work of God. This is important to note because it was now one hundred years since Cyrus first allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-3). Fourteen years have passed since Ezra went to Jerusalem. Now, human nature being what it is, people, including Christian people, get weary of long-term work. A missionary once thanked a congregation for praying for him and his work for twenty years and added the comment that not many Christians will pray as long as that. This is true, especially when there are few "fireworks" or "results" or, as is the case here, when the work runs into trouble and looks in danger of collapsing.

Back to Top

1:1-3

Ezra had worked for fourteen years and the Book of Ezra ended with a great spiritual repentance and re-dedication. Why then this depressing picture? It may be that Nehemiah, born and bred in captivity and having heard of the return of the Jews from the time of Cyrus onwards, had simply expected that after this long time the whole of Jerusalem would have been rebuilt. There is an important lesson here about expectations. When a new work begins, whether at home or on the mission field, those actually involved and those who pray, being persuaded that God is in it, naturally look for God's blessing and for fruitful results. These are often, but not always, given right from the start. God knows just how much we need encouragement. The work becomes established, often in the face of very real difficulties and equally real opposition, slander and hurt. Then there comes the necessary phase of consolidation of the work in terms of its long-term continuance. This phase is not nearly so exciting and it calls for hard work, sometimes with little to show for it. When, through the preaching of the Word, the Christians are awakened, challenged and brought to a new dedication, there is often an expectation of immediate success. But in fact there is even greater demand because the un-noticed slipping away from spiritual dedication will have produced a backlog in the work which has to be cleared before new progress can be made. This seems to have been the situation Nehemiah heard about. The arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem and his spiritual drive and determination had carried the people forward to the threshold of something new. But it can be dangerous to have a new and dedicated minister. People sometimes do not realise just how much they are being carried along by the dedication of others. It is all too easy to assume we are a vital part of the work. Many who had been critical and disaffected have been shocked when they left their congregation to realise the work went on and they were not missed.

Back to Top

1:4-11

It almost seems wrong to dissect a man's prayer when he is pouring out his heart to God. But it is good to learn how such people prayed. Note how deeply Nehemiah cared for and felt for the work of God. Many find it easy to criticise the church and their own congregations, but how many weep in prayer for the good of Christ's church? The heart-concern Nehemiah felt was not a brief surge of emotion, for it went on for months (December to April). He prayed on, becoming increasingly aware that his burden was indeed a God-given one, and that he himself was being laid hold on by God to play some significant part in the answer to his own prayers. When Nehemiah was eventually engaged in conversation by the king (2:2ff) this was no impulsive act on Nehemiah’s part. From the first, when he was concerned for the good of God's work, he did not rush in with petitions, protests, references to past government decisions, nor even circular letters to lists of people seeking to

organise nation-wide prayer. He simply prayed and went on praying. This is what the evangelical church simply will not do in our own generation. We tend to make public clamour when we should be making prayer at God's throne. No doubt there is a time for protest and for making full use of all legitimate means for influencing the decisions of those who govern us in church as well as state. But prayer, much prayer, should precede action and when we take this attitude we are in fact indicating to ourselves, to others and to God, that we are submitting ourselves to His sovereign will and providence. We are not devaluing any incentives to prayer. But if special movements for prayer are a substitute for, or a distraction from, the on-going prayer life of congregations and individuals there is something wrong. The apostolic church gave itself to prayer (Acts 6:4; 12:1-5).
Back to Top

1:4-11

Take good note how this man's prayer is grounded in the doctrine of God and begins with reference to the faithfulness and goodness of God (5). Note next how in prayer Nehemiah did not interpret the predicament of God's work in terms of human and devilish opposition, nor in terms of the pressures of secular society, nor in terms of the difficulty and demands of the work and the lack of workers. He went right to the heart of the problem and laid the blame at the feet of the people of God, himself and his fathers included. Nehemiah recognised that God's hand is not shortened nor is God indifferent or unwilling to bless His people (Isa. 59:1-2). The thing that always blocks the channels is the sin, unfaithfulness, complacency and unwillingness of God's own people (6-7). Then Nehemiah seems to have become bold in faith because he reminded God of His faithful promise regarding both judgment and restoration (8-9). This was important for Nehemiah and important for us because our hope for the future lies in what God has said and promised. There is hope for those who have failed. There is hope for those who know and who confess that they are not what they should be spiritually and not what they once were spiritually. It seems clear that Nehemiah himself had come close to God, and he knew it, because he used the word "They" in v.10. Now he began to take responsibility for the needy people and needy work. It seems from v.11 that at least a few had joined Nehemiah in prayer and that is always a good sign. They looked to God to open the way and Nehemiah was apprehensive about the need to approach the king. Perhaps we should read Psalm 130 and the hymn, "O for a closer walk with God" (Cowper).
Back to Top

2:1-3

It is amazing what happens when believers pray. God hears, God answers and opens up the way, often using us to become the instrument whereby our prayers are answered. This should make us both eager to pray and careful about what we ask. God tends to take us seriously when we speak to Him and that is why we should not ask extravagant things unless we are willing to live with the answer. But there is another result stemming from our prayers. The earnestness of our hearts and our genuine care for the work of the Lord tends to show on our faces. Now it was expected that the king's servants would never be sad or sullen in his presence, because that would shadow his pleasure and perhaps make him think some were plotting evil against him. But Nehemiah could not conceal his burdened heart and when the king took notice Nehemiah was afraid. This was not how he had planned to seek opportunity to broach the subject to the king. However, we must not fail to note that the king had sufficient interest in Nehemiah to notice that he was sad and this was unusual. Totalitarian kings do not usually show such interest in and care for even personal servants unless such a person has made a favourable impression over a spell of time. What we have to see and to be challenged by is that without speaking or preaching Nehemiah, by his life, the quality of his daily work and by the inner integrity of his spiritual life, had made an impact for God without knowing it. This is of course the work of the Holy Spirit whose presence, activity and work of preparation we generally tend to forget. As we study these stories of history we must learn to thrill at the competence of God who does all things well (2 Sam.22:31; Ps.18:30)).
Back to Top

2:4

One verse is sufficient for today if we link it with the previous verse where Nehemiah's first instinctive reaction to answered prayer and a door of opportunity was fear. Perhaps he had not expected God to answer quite so soon. But at the same time, after the initial shock, he proved himself to be ready to give a reason for his sadness and his hope. Read 1Pet.3:12-15 and recall how Peter himself had on one occasion not been ready because he was in the wrong place, among the wrong people, at the wrong time. Then, because his own heart was proud

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and boastful, when he was challenged he denied his Lord (Mk.14: 66ff). Nehemiah was "not ashamed to own his Lord, or to defend His cause" and he gave a clear word of testimony, no doubt wondering just how the king would react and what the outcome would be. He must have been both thrilled and surprised when the king asked the question in today's verse. But Nehemiah's reaction was immediate. He shot an arrow of prayer to the Lord before he spoke, always a wise thing to do! Three things are to be seen clearly. First, Nehemiah's spiritual life and walk with God were such that he did not need time to go and prepare to pray. Second, it is clear from what he went on to say that he had thought long and well about the whole situation and about what provisions would be needed in order to tackle the needs of God's work. Prayer is not a substitute for thought. Third, there is a promise, given much later by our Lord Jesus Christ, to the effect that we shall be given the very words we need at the very time we need them (Mk.13:9-11). The words of Jesus do not forbid careful thought but forbid advance anxiety. Of course, being a godly man, Nehemiah would no doubt be aware of Ps.50:14-1.5 and Isa.65:24 and 2 Chron. 7:14-15.

Back to Top

2:5-8

It is clear that Nehemiah had already made plain to the Lord that he was willing to go to this new work. We may imagine that during his long time of prayer some conversation such as that in Isa. 6:8 had taken place. It is also clear from v.8 that in all things God was working for good in the interest of His people and His work (Rom. 8:28). He had in fact been working long before the messengers first came in 1:2-3. Before Nehemiah was ever aware of it, he was being trained and prepared for a work that was far greater than he had any idea of. We see here one of the reasons why we should give great diligence to the "ordinary" things of Christian life: our prayers, our Bible study, our Sunday worship and our being at the Prayer Meeting. Who knows what we are being prepared for? Some of us who were in the armed forces during the war resented the relentless training, but discovered at action stations that we had been well prepared for immediate obedience and accurate carrying out of orders. Christian life and service are warfare, not a game or a hobby. Nehemiah was "on the ball". He asked for personal leave of absence and was able to indicate a rough timetable. The king wanted him back and knew he could trust Nehemiah to come back when he said he would. Nehemiah had thought about visas, work permits, supply of goods, authorisation and safe conduct guarantees on the journey to Judah. There was no rash rushing on "in faith" trusting that the Lord would work things out. What was in Nehemiah's power to deal with, he dealt with through all the normal channels. The king was impressed. He would have expected this man to be efficient. And when godless people respect Christians in this way we may well begin to turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6; 2 Tim. 2:15).

Back to Top

2:9-10

The need for Nehemiah's careful preparation now becomes evident in the immediate anger of Sanballat and Tobiah and their clear antagonism to the people and work of God. If we express the situation in modern terms we have to recognise that a church beginning to show signs of spiritual recovery under the hand of God will be more likely to receive criticism and opposition than respect and admiration. Nehemiah, with his escort and his papers all in order, was ready to meet the opposition. How important it is to be ready and indeed to make rightful use of the system. Think how Paul made use of his Roman citizenship in Philippi and in appealing to Caesar (Acts 25:11, 25). No doubt he also had his "papers" with him. Think how he chose Silas as a colleague because he too was a Roman citizen (Acts :15:40). Think again how Paul set the Pharisees and Sadducees against each other in the interest of Gospel truth (Acts 23:6-10). How wise we need to be, not least if we are to enter public debate about the Gospel. How we need to be prepared. Note that Nehemiah accepted the king's escort whereas Ezra had refused it (Ezra 8:21-23). He did not do what someone else had done as if "copying" was the essence of faith. The situations were different, and the methods had to be different. But we need to be walking closely with God if we are not to be uncertain. Of course, there are times when "copying" is the right thing (Phil. 3:17; 1 Cor, 4:15-17). Branching out and doing a new thing just because it is new can be proud, superficial and a sign of immaturity (Eph. 4:14-16).

Back to Top

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2:11-16

We, who know the story, are aware of the glorious work about to be carried through by Nehemiah, but what we have to note here is the very quiet matter-of-fact way in which it all began. We cannot tell why there were the three days of quiet and rest before Nehemiah began the inspection of the situation, but after a long, demanding journey it was wise not to rush into things. Think of how often we Christians are in a rush. Think also how so often when a work is beginning there is a veritable avalanche of commotion and publicity, as if whipping up enthusiasm was a necessary factor in spiritual work. It is clear Nehemiah knew in his own heart what God had called him to do and yet he does not seem to have told even his close companions. Perhaps he realised they would not understand or that they would not be able to rise to the situation. Nehemiah made it his business to survey the extent of the need, to assess and evaluate the scope of the ruins, and the vast amount of clearing that would have to be done before any rebuilding could begin. Then, only later would the reality of the rebuilding become visible. This man who had to lead the work and who had to inspire the people to make a beginning was determined to be clear in his own mind before he spoke. He did not want anyone to dismiss the project as a mere bright idea that would not work. Nor did he want to draw the premature attention of the enemy. Nehemiah knew he faced a challenge, rather than having been given an opportunity. But he also knew that God was in the situation. This is the secret not only of beginning but of continuing. If we are in God's place, doing what God has given us to do, we can be confident that God will grant the enabling.

Back to Top

2:17-20

Up to this point the story, in some ways, is similar to the story of Christmas. God's appointed man had arrived on the scene to set in motion a great. work but no one seemed to have noticed. Certainly the arrival of Nehemiah's caravan train would have been seen and reported but no-one seems to have sensed the significance. Now it all became public in terms of response to what God had already begun to do. Note that Nehemiah immediately identified himself with the people in their broken-down condition. He spoke of the trouble *we* are in (17). He highlighted the ruined state of the city of Jerusalem, bringing home to all the fact that God's holy work had been allowed to disintegrate or, at least, had been started and then abandoned. He then spoke of how the people of God had lost their testimony in the eyes of the world. This is the "disgrace" mentioned at the end of v.17. We need to be reminded of this in our day. When godless people see churches scarcely half filled on a Sunday morning, closed on a Sunday evening, falling into disrepair and being sold off for secular use, what do they think? With the church in general for ever pleading for a little extra money, afraid to ask for true sacrificial giving from its own members, the world sees no reason why it should take the message of the church seriously. This is the disgrace of a church that has lost its testimony and credibility. Against this kind of background Nehemiah challenged the people to rise up and build. It was straight talking, backed up with the clear affirmation that he believed God's hand was on him and that God had made the whole venture possible by His over-ruling providence and provision. The amazing thing was that the response of the people was immediate with resolute action, This is nothing other than the work of the Holy Spirit.

Back to Top

2:17-20

We ended yesterday's reading by referring to the Holy Spirit and we affirm that the evidence of the Spirit's presence and working is not superficial froth nor subjective excitement but a willingness to get down to the business of working for God right where we are at the point of obvious and demanding need. Here, as soon as the quickening power of the Holy Spirit began to inspire and activate the people of God, the Devil awakened the opposition. First of all the enemy mocked and derided, seeking to demoralise and embarrass the people. It is not easy to be laughed at. Then they threatened, accusing the people of subversion against the government. The objective was, of course, to distract the servants of God right at the start, when they were most likely to feel discouraged by the sheer demand of the work. Nehemiah could well have brandished the king's letters of authority but he was not prepared to wage war on a worldly level, and neither must we (2 Cor.10:4). If we use the world's methods and techniques, our attention will be focused on people rather than on God, and no spiritual work can go forward on that level. Nehemiah replied to the accusers, and he did so in the hearing of the people of God and their leaders, making clear affirmation of faith in God. It was a tremendous statement of confidence in God and it was made by the man who knew God's hand was on him (v.8, 18). He was not going forward in a

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speculative way, hoping it would work out. He was under orders, and he knew it. Because of that, he believed his Captain and Commander in Heaven would be true to His promise. The work would be done and be done by God's servants and no others. Read Rom. 8:31; Acts 5:38-39; Rev. 3:7.
Back to Top

3:1-5

Note in these verses, which at first do not look very promising or instructive, the repetition of the phrase “next to”. This introduces us to the fact that the building of the defence of the work was indeed team-work, with willing people working side by side, shoulder to shoulder. Would that it was always so in the Lord's work! Note next that the nobles of the Tekoites declined to do their share. Perhaps they thought that "building work" was below them. Perhaps they felt too gifted and superior to be just ordinary workers. Perhaps they did not really believe in the work at all. There are always people like that. They consider themselves very spiritual but are very different from the Servant King who washed the disciples' feet (John 13:1-5). We shall see later that the ordinary Tekoites were ashamed of their "big" men. Of course what people did and what they did not do was all recorded and we have it here to read. It is God who keeps the "work-sheets" of the kingdom. A useful thing we could well do with this whole chapter is to consult a plan of the walls of Jerusalem and see where everyone worked. We are told that the high priest set the example. The spiritual leader was the first to "roll up his sleeves", not least to show that faith without works is dead (Jas.2:26). The work began at the Sheep Gate which was at the north-east corner, where the Temple stood, and the main danger from enemies would come from the north. Therefore the work started not at the easiest point but at the place of most danger and most need. Here is the lesson for our generation. Be sure you are working where the need is and not just where your preferences lead you.
Back to Top

3:6-16

The account moves anti-clockwise around the walls. We cannot try to identify all the workers but we note in v.8 goldsmiths and perfumers or pharmacists; in v.9 a district commissioner; in v.12 another ruler or administrator and his daughters. They were not doing "fine" work for which they were qualified but were pushing barrow-loads of bricks, shifting rubbish, wielding picks and shovels, all no doubt under the direction of "tradesmen" who knew about building. No doubt some would rather do this than preach, but again the lesson is the challenge of the need which takes priority over our gifts and skills, although in more normal times these are certainly not to be denied or wasted! In the providence of God, and no doubt with some wise administration, the work squads would be a mixed company. That is always the best for a given piece of work or for congregational life. It is all very well for "peer groups" to come together but in that there are immense limitations and dangers. In the building of this wall what would have happened if one section had been left to a squad of ministers, who might have been good at theology but very limited in the skill of mixing mortar? Groups (and evangelicalism is obsessed by them) which gather on the basis of intellect, social standing, financial status or hobbies are instantly limited. In fact, they do not seem to be in accordance with New Testament teaching regarding the functioning of the church, which is the Body of Christ. Paul makes plain in 1 Cor.12:14-26 that for right functioning all kinds of "members" are needed, and what are considered to be the least impressive are necessary. Perhaps today is the time to think of whom we should befriend in church next Sunday.
Back to Top

3:17-32

The general tenor of this whole chapter suggests that the people of God found a real fellowship with one another as they worked. Perhaps it was the awareness of danger and demand that bound them together. Today's list of workers starts with the Levites, whose official function was spiritual in relation to worship. But work and worship go together. Remember that when we are a "cleaning party" in church! But when we are allocated different jobs to do we must remember that the work is one work, and we must not be distracted by comparing with, or being jealous of, those given different things to do. Look back to v.13-14 and think of those working in the dark Hinnom Valley or at the Dung Gate. There is not much glamour or excitement there, whereas the men in the north (v.1) would be aware they indeed been set in the front line. But there was no complaint from the Dung Gate and a ruler was foreman in charge. This is real dedication. Note also in v.20 that the High Priest was

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working away from his own home. This is an example of seeking first the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). We have already commented on the Tekoites feeling ashamed at the unwillingness of their nobles and we see their reaction in v.27. They did a second section of the wall. What a blessing "second mile" Christians can be in an on-going work! What a blessing are those who, though never in the public eye, pray without ceasing, and work with a willingness that cheers and inspires the hearts of leaders like Nehemiah! The wall of defence was being built to guard the future of the work, and there was unanimity of purpose, no stupid demarcation disputes. They were working for God, not Nehemiah. (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25).

Back to Top

4:1-6

The work was beginning to take shape and it was clear that this was to be no temporary, "flash in the pan" flurry of religion. The people were in earnest because God was in earnest, and there are few things that anger the Devil more than the emergence of a true work of God. Superficial works that are essentially man-centred are usually left alone by the enemy because he sees they have no real significance. It was not so here and we must note the words "angry", "incensed" and "ridiculed" (v.1). They did not openly oppose at first, they simply mocked. The following words (v.2) reveal how they devalued and despised the spiritual efforts and dedication of men and women who were taking God seriously. It is still so. In our own denomination the "establishment" has simply refused to see or at least to recognise as valuable the manifest fruits of many soundly biblical ministries in our land. They mock. They explain the "success" in all sorts of mean-minded ways. Note how the enemies mocked the past heritage of the Jews as well as their present efforts. They predicted that it would all collapse as soon as it was established. It must have been sore for Nehemiah and his colleagues to listen to this kind of thing, but we must see how they dealt with it. They did not reply. They did not defend their work. They simply got on with the job, and in ways and places where the enemy could not see, and in ways the enemy certainly would not understand, they committed their cause to God whose work it was. They took it to the Lord in prayer. They believed God was their rock, defence and vindicator. And they were ready to leave the enemy to be dealt with by God. This is faith.

Back to Top

4:7-9

The people committed themselves and their work to God but there was not an immediate improvement in the situation. Indeed, the Devil and his men were angrier than ever and planned more specific opposition. It could not be otherwise. This work that was being built was challenging the powers of evil and darkness and taking from them territory they had held for a long time and considered to be their own. We need to remember this so that when the Devil attacks we are not taken by surprise. What else would the Devil do in the face of such a challenge from the God who seems to entrust His work to very fallible creatures? And so, opposition with ridicule was followed by opposition with anger, and attack that was aimed at beating down the resolution of the Jews, and doing so by fear. Fear is one of the Devil's great weapons and when we are swept by waves of fear that we know to be irrational, we must recognise at once that this is the Devil and we must refuse to be unbalanced by it. It is important in spiritual warfare and service to keep our minds clear and our hearts warm towards God. This is exactly what the Jews did. They prayed, and they set a guard. This is exactly what Jesus later told His disciples to do. Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation (Matt. 26:41). And make sure you set the guard at the areas of your life where, by experience, you know yourself to be most vulnerable.

Back to Top

4:10-14

Now comes opposition by discouragement and this is not surprising. The work was hard and costly, there was no let-up, and the people were more aware of all that had to be done than what had already been accomplished.

Tiredness is a great avenue of the Devil's approach and all too often we play right into his hands by our indiscipline. Here in the story the pessimists began to speak and to spread their feelings of discouragement and desolation. Some of them had (perhaps of necessity?) been in contact with the enemy and had heard their boasts about secret infiltration and quick over-powering. The Jews who lived in the area around Jerusalem, being very aware (and too aware) of the numbers and apparent power of the enemy, came into the city and again and again spoke the propaganda of defeat. The result was that the people had their eyes, thoughts and hearts focused on the problems rather than on the God who had called them, set them in their places and prospered them thus far

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in spite of all attempted hindrances. Of course, they were tired. They longed for visible victory and progress. But assurance of victory comes only when we deliberately look to the things that are unseen and eternal (Heb.11:27; 2 Cor. 4:16, 18). Nehemiah set the people, the men alongside their women and children, so that the men would see whom they were fighting for, and ordered them to have their weapons ready, Then he charged the leaders of the people in words that made it plain their trust was not to be in weapons. Perhaps he reminded them of Isa. 30:15-18 and 2 Chron.14:11; 20:1-15. *Do not be afraid* (John 14:1).

Back to Top

4:15-23

It is comforting to know that the Devil's plans are known to God and that, when it is wise and necessary, He exposes them. At times the Devil is allowed to have his way, as both Peter and Job knew (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Lk. 22:31). But even then the decisive factor is God's will, purpose and work and we need to recall the words of Ps. 2:4. The Lord holds evil in derision and the total defeat of the powers of evil is made manifest in the Cross (Col. 2:15). It has to be assumed here that when Sanballat and company realised their plans had been exposed they then withdrew. This was the signal for the people to resume the work of building and they did so with a new awareness of being in the midst of foes. They worked from then on, ready to fight. Note how Nehemiah and his lieutenants not only supervised the work, organising it in detail, but also set the example of dedication and commitment (16, 21, 23). It is wonderful to see the confidence of Nehemiah and how his faith was made manifest to the people he led. He asked the people to trust him and to follow him (20) and they did, because they had already seen and proved his spiritual and practical competence. This is a word to all who in any way have charge of others in the things pertaining to God's work. We must lead by example and be able to say to others to follow us as we follow Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1.). But that requires us to have confidence in God and to be assured that, because we are right in the centre of God's will, He will certainly fight for us. One thing will have come clear to the Jews in Jerusalem. They needed each other. They also needed to see that the work was far more important than any individual or personal consideration.

Back to Top

4:15-23

There is a final lesson to learn from v.19-20 and it will help us in our own work. The people working in one given area would not be able to see what was going on in other areas. And, while it was right and necessary to concentrate on what God had given them to do, it was also vital for them to remember that they were part of a work that was far bigger than ever appeared at any given moment. Perhaps Nehemiah reminded them that they were part of the work done by generations before them; bound together with their fellow Jews still in Persia; and part of the work that would go on after their lives were finished. The work is great and, whether at home or abroad, the work is one work. Our battles and struggles and costly service may have significance in what our fellow Christians are going through at the very same time in their far off areas. We cannot understand and we must not interpret our battles solely in terms of our own situation or our own sanctification. As Paul says in 1 Cor.12:26 when one member of the body suffers the whole body feels it. Again Paul interprets some of his sufferings in terms of the salvation struggles of the Colossians whom he had never in fact met (Col. 1:24). The work is great and widely spread but the literal fact of separation is overcome when we make it our business to meet at the Throne of Grace. But note how Nehemiah, God's appointed leader, took the initiative and indicated that he was quite sure God would lead and guide him so that he would know where and when special needs would arise. Spiritual leadership is a burden as well as a privilege. We must be willing to be led and we must pray for our leaders.

Back to Top

5:1-5

The Devil never gives up. If there is not one thing to hinder the work and distract from it there will be something else. A significant spiritual victory had been won as recorded in the previous chapter and the work went on. Now, from within the work, among the people committed to it, another crisis flared up. We could express it this way: having failed in his attempt to hinder the work by threat and frontal assault, the Devil “joined the church” in order to work from within. This is, of course, New Testament teaching, as is shown in Jude 3-4; Phil. 1:15-18; Acts 5:1-3ff. It is clear also from today's passage that the Devil always finds some self-centred, wilful believers whom he can use to do his work. The great outcry we read about was obviously the

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eruption of something that had been going on a long time and going on in a deliberately concealed way, because Nehemiah knew nothing about until it had reached crisis proportions. Why had no-one reported this to Nehemiah or to any of the elders? Were some of the senior men involved in the oppression of the people in order to make money? Did no-one feel sufficient burden for the good of the work and integrity of the fellowship to speak to Nehemiah about what was going on? There is no place in Christian work for being a trouble-making tell-tale, running to pass on every little bit of gossip. But there are times when the attitude of "Don't tell the minister" is folly and a denial of his God given pastoral and leadership role. In Jerusalem the people who were being taken advantage of should have spoken out far sooner; and those who were aware of the situation should have taken action on behalf of the oppressed. Doing nothing can sometimes be doing Devil's work. Read Acts 6:1-7.

Back to Top

5:6-13

It is not easy to be the leader of a work when it becomes evident that the Devil has gained entrance and that senior men, who have been trusted, are the ones who have put personal gain (whether in money, influence or popularity) before the good of the work. Nehemiah was angry and, knowing that people had to be confronted, he pondered deeply. He took time to let his anger subside and he took his burdened heart to God. Nehemiah knew he had to challenge these powerful men whose "businesses" were established. He had to risk alienating them. What if they withstood his leadership? What if they defected to the enemy? Could the work go on without their skilled capacity and leadership? There is always a temptation to make excuses for and to tolerate people who, as we say, "have a lot to give" and for whom there may not seem to be any replacements. But if there is wrong at the heart of the fellowship the work will not last and in due time there will be reaction. We must remember that our place in the work of God is a gift from God. It is not ours by right. And, if we are wrong in ourselves and are doing wrong in relation to other people, then we forfeit our right to remain, not least because our wrongdoing, which may be overlooked by the church, is seen and despised by the world of unbelievers. This is a theme that is dealt with in the New Testament in such verses as Rom. 2:24; 1 Tim. 6:1; Titus 2:5. Our passage today, which tells of the response to the challenge, shows us yet again the spiritual calibre of Nehemiah. But, as we shall see tomorrow, there was also a great depth of humanity and care in this man of God.

Back to Top

5:6-13

Think of the situation. People were away from homes and farms, engaged in building the walls of God's work. The population of Jerusalem was swollen and the question of supplies of food and availability of finance were real ones. Just as in wartime, unprincipled men saw the chance to manipulate the market to make a profit. Houses and farms were being taken as security for loans to buy food and pay taxes. Then when payments could not be kept up, property was being confiscated, both sons and daughters were being sold into slavery. This was the evil Nehemiah challenged publicly, causing the nobles to be exposed for the ruthless manipulators they were. No Jew should have extorted interest from another Jew (Ex.22:25), especially in such a situation. Nehemiah declared that he and others, at their own cost, had been buying back Jews sold to the nations (8), lending money and supplies to those in need (10), while these rogues had been doing the very opposite. It had to stop! That was Nehemiah's judgment. Restitution had to be made. Their repentance had to be practical and not just "spiritual". Then, and this is again an indication of the work of the Spirit (John 16:8), the guilty ones were convicted and brought to repentance. At least, they *said* they would put things right. Then, to give them a deep sense of the urgency of the situation, Nehemiah uttered the words of warning about God's judgment (13). This again is New Testament teaching. If we will not judge ourselves then God will judge us (1 Cor.11:31). Rend your hearts, not your garments (Joel 2:13). Actions speak louder than words. We had better read Matt. 5:21-26, and deal rightly with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Back to Top

5:14-19

We have here Nehemiah's testimony concerning the twelve years of his ministry. Although as governor he was entitled to provision and privilege, he freely yielded all his rights so that he would not be a burden to the people and the work of which he regarded himself first as a servant and then a leader. This attitude he adopted and kept

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for his own household, and over and above that, he provided for a large company of others who for various reasons came to the governor's house. If we wanted to be cynical we could say that Nehemiah was obviously a wealthy man. But not all wealthy Christians use their wealth wisely in the interest of God's work. The nobles we read of yesterday were not of this mind. Nehemiah testified that his whole attitude to life was based on his fear of the Lord, his reverential commitment to God and to His work. In the last verse of the chapter Nehemiah was not boasting. These words were spoken in private to God, and he was simply anticipating what Jesus said about those who pray and serve in secret being rewarded openly by their heavenly Father (Matt. 6:2-6). The great message of the passage concerns a God-fearing man who had a great sense of the privilege and responsibility of being entrusted with God's work and God's people. In order that he might be found faithful he yielded his rights and counted all things loss (Phil. 2:5-8; 3:7-11). Having spoken in v.13 of the possibility of some losing their place in God's family service, Nehemiah was, like Paul after him, determined not to let that happen to him (1 Cor, 9:24-27).

Back to Top

6:1-4

The Devil is certainly persistent and he varies his methods in a very crafty way. This is why we must make it our business to be aware of his devices and his well laid schemes (2 Cor. 11:13-15; Eph. 6:10-12). It is amazing how so many Christians are taken in by the Devil simply because he comes in a way that seems to be spiritual and friendly. We must remember that Jesus spoke of false Christs (Matt. 24:24) and Paul. spoke to Timothy of distracting influences (1Tim.4:1; 2 Tim.4:3). In today's passage it seems that Nehemiah discerned at once the danger of what seemed to be a friendly approach and an offer of co-operation. It is a subtle approach still being used. Nehemiah was invited to a conference with the agenda of collaboration on the grounds that all were trying to do the same thing. But this was not so and, following the established pattern, Nehemiah stood his ground. People cannot walk and work together unless they are agreed (Amos 3:3 AV). Look back to Ezra 4:1-3 and Neh.2:20. If we are building a church, that is a people, a place and a work for God, then it must be done by those who have faith, because without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb.11:6). Paul is even more radical when he says that whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). If there are ever introduced into the church attitudes and practices which do not have God at the heart and head, it is only a matter of time before the spiritual vitality and direction of the work become confused and misdirected. Would God that we all realised that the work we are involved in is indeed a great work, because it is God's work! We must not come down.

Back to Top

6:1-4

The wall had virtually been completed apart from the doors in the entrance gates. The work stood poised ready for the future. The Devil had attacked openly in chapter 4 and had been repulsed. The Devil had attacked from inside the work in chapter 5 and had been thrown out. Now the Devil tried to get Nehemiah out from Jerusalem, away from the solid ground of being in God's will and God's place. The idea was to get Nehemiah on his own, and the adversaries were powerful and persistent men who were not easy to refuse. But in the interest of the work Nehemiah refused to get involved in something he was suspicious about. His answer was simple. He asked to be left alone to do what God had given him to do. We begin to sense something of the essential loneliness of the leader of God's work. Nehemiah must have been glad the disturbance within the fellowship in chapter 5 had been resolved before this next attack came. But think of the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional demands on this man. A work precious to God had been entrusted to his care and leadership, and he had to see to it that he was found faithful. No doubt after this confrontation Nehemiah would be slandered, accused of arrogance and of rejecting out of hand genuine approaches of friendship. There is no easy way to be faithful to God. Even Jesus was slandered, accused of being in league with the Devil and of being a destroyer of God's work (John 7:20; Lk.11:15; Matt. 26:6). He warned His disciple that the world would hate and persecute them also (John 15:18-21). We must not be taken by surprise (1 Pet. 4:12ff). We are engaged in spiritual warfare.

Back to Top

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6:5-9

There is no limit to the hateful slander inspired by Hell. What we read here is threat, lies and blackmail. Now, powerful men in the realm of politics (secular politics and church politics) can cause a great deal of trouble by setting in motion committees of enquiry. Even if these committees do not come to a judgment, they create tension, burn up energy and cause immense distraction from and hindrance to the work of God. The Devil will do anything to hinder and to hurt those who are determined to be real with God and to go on in His service. Note that two parts of the letter were false and one part true, even though the truth was distorted. The Jews did not want to rebel against the government, although some hotheads may have had some such idea. Nehemiah had no wish to become king, although he was the leader. The prophets would however proclaim that the Jews had a ‘king'. Although the Davidic line of kings had disappeared at the time of the Captivity, the hope of Israel remained that one day their king would come. But the enemy distorted this as well. When the king finally came, He declared that His kingdom was not of this world (Jn.18:36) and He was the one who insisted that the people "render to Caesar" what was his by right (Matt. 22:15-22). In the situation we see the wisdom of Nehemiah. There is a time to turn the other cheek but when the good of God's work is at stake then the lies of the Devil must be refuted openly. People who tell lies must be called liars and exposed as agents of evil. Nehemiah discerned the activity of the Devil who was using his instrument of fear. The prayer at the end of v.9 will "ring a bell" with all those who have to confront evil-doers.

Back to Top

6:10-14

The Devil is indeed busy. Right after his courageous reply to the blackmailers Nehemiah was faced with a further undermining attack from the Devil, this time through one of his own colleagues and counsellors. Note how comprehensive an exposure we have been given of the Devil. In v.1-4 he is the Deceiver; v.5-9 the Accuser; and in v.10-14 he is the Liar, attempting to panic the leader of God's work. Shemaiah was a prophet (10,12) and was "shut up" in some secluded part of the Temple, assumed to be in some prophetic ecstasy. People would think he was receiving some message from God. He sent for Nehemiah and suggested "in the name of God" that the two of them should go for a meeting into the holy place of the Temple, ostensibly because he had received a "revelation" about a plot to kill Nehemiah. Of course, if Nehemiah had gone into that part of the Temple his action would have angered and alienated the priests and this would have spread to the people. There is also a suggestion that Nehemiah was being urged to seek sanctuary in the Temple to save his life from threats. How he discerned that the whole thing was false we cannot tell. No doubt God, who looks after His servants, made it plain. What Nehemiah discovered was that a group of "false prophets" had been "bought" by the enemy. We are shocked by this. But what would our price be to stand back from loyalty to God's appointed leader? How many ministers and missionaries have been let down and betrayed by Christians they have trusted? God will judge. We can be sure of that! (Ps.105:12-15; Isa. 54:17).

Back to Top

6:15-19

The first word of v.15 “so” must be noted carefully because it indicates clearly the process by which the work of God had reached this stage of completeness. Every step and development, had been contested by outside enemies and hindered by the weaknesses, failings and compromises of those inside. The whole of v.15 is really an utterance of faith, recognising that God had been in it all, using everything and over-ruling in all the different situations, to further His purposes, It had been hard and costly work, and it had needed the resolute faith of a leader like Nehemiah to keep it going. But right from the beginning Nehemiah had known he was commissioned by God to do this work and that was his constant encouragement and assurance. God was in it all. We find Paul in Acts 28:14 summarising his journey to Rome in this same way. It had involved false arrest, an appeal to Caesar and a shipwreck, but these things had brought him to Rome where God wanted him to be. Note in v.15 that the wall had been completed in a remarkably short time in spite of all the hazards and distractions and it seems to have been this fact that impressed the unfriendly nations around Jerusalem. There seems to have come upon them a real fear of God, something akin to the fear that came upon Jericho as Israel approached (Josh. 2:9-11). This of course, is the work of the Holy Spirit and we all tend to forget the on-going work of the Spirit of God. He is God's silent, unobtrusive worker, but He is always accurate and effective. We read here that people fell in their own esteem. That seems to mean they realised that they had blundered in their

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attitudes and actions and had allowed themselves to be inveigled into fighting against God. Perhaps they would be more careful in future before making alliances. It is best to be careful.
Back to Top

6:15-19

Success and accomplishment in any stage of God's work must not cause us to assume that the Devil has been finally banished. Nor must we assume that all who have been involved in the work are necessarily equally committed to God. Nehemiah discovered that some of the significant nobles were, in fact, very sympathetic to Tobiah, the leading opponent of the work. These nobles made it their business to be for ever speaking well of Tobiah, indicating they knew what a worthy man he was and what a help he could be to God's work. No doubt they urged Tobiah to write the letters to Nehemiah and, although we do not know what the letters contained, they caused Nehemiah to fear. No doubt Tobiah used the age old technique of saying to God's appointed leader, "A lot of your people are not really happy with the way the work is going." It must have been sore for Nehemiah to realise that some of his trusted nobles were, in fact, something of a "fifth-column" for the enemy within the work. Here was a potentially powerful group not in sympathy with the work or with its leader. They made it their business to speak in ways calculated to hurt and distress Nehemiah who, having carried the burden of spiritual leadership for so long, must have been tired and therefore vulnerable. The narrative makes it clear why these nobles were disaffected. Their commitment to God and their willingness to serve were compromised and qualified because of family relationships (18). Look back to 3:4,29-30 and see that these troublesome men were among the leading wall-builders. But there had been marriages between Jews and pagans and the whole issue of spiritual allegiance had been confused. It is a constant danger. All of us can be tempted to adjust our spiritual assessments in respect of people we are related to or friendly with. It is not easy to risk losing a dear one by speaking plainly. But Jesus spoke solemn words about those who loved close friends and relatives more than Him (Matt.10:34-39).
Back to Top

7:1-4

The wall was completed and the surrounding peoples had in some measure been subdued but this did not make Nehemiah complacent in any way. As a spiritual leader he was also very practical. He was fully aware that the work of God has to be watched and guarded as well as built (Ps.127:1). Now, guarding gates can be boring and dreary work and its significance can be lost sight of, especially if there are other more exciting activities going on. This is why Nehemiah appointed men who were faithful, trustworthy and God-fearing, that is with lives centred on God. Nehemiah needed men who would not be blackmailed or side-tracked; men who saw the work as God's work and therefore requiring the highest loyalty and dedication. It seems that at this stage the dimensions of the city augured well for the future and indicated that a work of real significance had been started. But right then there seemed to be too few people to maintain the work and to carry it forward. There was even a housing shortage and that indicated the kind of discomfort and even privation that could lead to discontent and demoralisation. That is why the people were given guard duties and administration responsibilities in their own particular areas. They would be aware that in guarding and serving Jerusalem they were working for something in which they had a very personal stake. This is something that must be cultivated and preserved in our own day. We must see "our" church as something in which we are a real and vital part. We must see "our" responsibility for work and for prayer. We must see "our" place in the work as a great gift and privilege from God. And we must see that if we refuse to take our places with loyalty and dependability not only do others have an extra load, but the whole work is put in danger from the enemy.
Back to Top

7:5-73

Not many will have the stamina, interest or even the time to read this colossal list of names, so we highlight the significant verses. In v.5 Nehemiah testifies that it was God who inspired and commanded him to institute this census. He made enquiries and found the book of the genealogy which is referred to in Ezra 2, and the details of the two lists are virtually identical. In v.61-65 we are told of some people who could not prove that they did in fact rightly belong to the people of Israel. No-one was allowed simply to attach themselves to the people and work of God, nor were they allowed to assume they had the right to a place, whether in the general ranks of the people or in the priesthood. Each person had to prove they had the right to be there and some were sternly

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forbidden to function as priests until it was made clear by God that they were in fact entitled to handle holy things. Perhaps Nehemiah and his colleagues were aware of how, away back at the Exodus, there had gone up with Israel a very mixed crowd of people (hangers-on). Many of these soon became a problem and a hindrance when it became clear that spiritual pilgrimage and the holy service of God were costly matters (Exod. 12:38; Num. 11:4-5). There is a serious lesson here for all who have responsibility in Christ's church for the appointing of ministers, elders, Sunday School teachers and all others who will be in places of influence. No one should be chosen simply on the basis of gifts, personality or wealth. Only those who have proved their spiritual lineage and their spiritual worth should be given responsibility. Every true work of God attracts and gathers in people who "enjoy" being there but who never come to real faith. Not all who say, "Lord, Lord " are necessarily believers. Read Matt. 7:21-23 and 2 Tim. 2:19.

Back to Top

7:5-73

We spoke yesterday of the guarding of the priesthood, that is the guarding of the spiritual. heart of the work, and we could well refer today to v.43-45 and to the very small number of Levites. Perhaps we should apply this lesson to our own day and speak of the number of evangelically minded people who, even when they have the chance, simply refuse to enter into the heart of the work of God which is the ministry of prayer. It is quite astonishing and very significant that so many Christians simply will not give themselves to the prayer life of the congregation. They may enthuse about any and every "special" gathering for prayer, and about all kinds of Christian activity, especially if it has a pleasurable element in it, but they will not come to prayer. Nehemiah was a man of prayer and his heart must have been heavy when so few men were there to be his prayer-partners. Many ministers up and down the land feel the same. How many who read these notes and are blessed and instructed by them are a disappointment to their ministers in the matter of prayer and spiritual loyalty? Note in v.70-72 that there was a wave of practical generosity. We can but hope it was an ongoing thing to provide for the needs of the work. One last observation about the "census" is that Nehemiah, having guarded the work from outside opposition, was now guarding it from inside treachery. Read Neh. 2:20; Jude 4; 2 Tim.2:18; 3:8; and Phil. 3:18. Guard the Gospel (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14). Guard yourself against evil influences (2 Tim. 4:14-15). Remember that we, and the work, belong to God, not to ourselves.

Back to Top

8:1-3

This whole chapter has to do with the ministry of the Word of God. Jerusalem's Temple and city walls had been built, giving the work of God a focus and a defence. Now it was of vital importance that the people of God should be built up in their faith and so be made competent to carry the work forward into succeeding generations. Nehemiah had organised the work and the people, and now there seems to have been a spontaneous gathering of the people and a unanimous request for the institution of a thoroughly biblical ministry. The request from the people found Ezra ready and waiting, and Ezra the priest now comes to the forefront and Nehemiah the administrator slips into the background. This willingness of Nehemiah, who had done such a great work, to step aside gives the lie to those who had accused him (6:6-7) of seeking to use the work of God to make a name for himself. That temptation is not unknown, and it is all too easy to slip into a worldly desire for place. When this happens a man's ministry becomes corrupted and "tailored" so that he will not lose popular acclaim. Although his ministry may still seem to be faithfully biblical, if people listen carefully they will realise that there are many matters that are simply not preached about. All who have a ministry of the Word to fulfil should set themselves to be faithful so that they may testify at the end as Paul did in Acts 20:17-27. Do not fail to note that although all are called to serve, and all have free access to God through Christ, not all are called to be ministers of the Word. God appoints some (Eph. 4:11-14) and no-one should lightly on their own initiative take on the task of ministry (Heb. 5:4).

Back to Top

8:1-3

This gathering of the people *may* be explained by the fact that the time of the new moon was regarded as "holy" and was marked by special sacrifices (Num.28:11; 29:1). There was an emphasis on new beginnings and even on a desire for permanence (Ps.72:5). But in the context of the demanding work of building and the awareness of enemies we should see here a deeper desire to learn afresh from God. The facts that the people requested

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such ministry, that they listened attentively, that the women and all the children who were able to understand even in small measure attended, and that the ministry went on for a long time without interest waning, all indicate that this was in fact a work of the Spirit of God. This is the kind of thing seen in times of great revival when, in a sovereign way, God "awakens" a desire and a hunger for holy things and constrains the people to gather and to listen. But the same working of the Spirit is seen in an on-going ministry of the Word as ministers and people alike give themselves to waiting upon God. We must note carefully that Ezra was not only alive to the situation and responsive to the call of God and the desire of the people, he was also ready and prepared to minister the Word. This is very important and those called to preach must see to it that they never allow the many other duties and claims in a minister's life to push sermon preparation into the background. We sin against God and against His hungry people if we go to them ill prepared. That is no way to handle God's Word (2 Cor. 4:1-2; 2 Tim.2:15).

Back to Top

8:4-8

This is a glorious reading. It has to do with pulpit and people and makes plain that when the Word of God is rightly preached and received then the hearts of all are turned to God Himself in worship, praise and thanksgiving. It was by the Word that the hearts of the people were kindled to worship, and once awakened these hearts had to be nourished, fed and instructed by the Word. Note that the people were together. This was not an "individualistic" spirituality and it is important nowadays to emphasise that coming together as the people of God is a basic necessity for worship and growth in grace (Heb.10:23-25; Eph. 4:11-16). It is important for the people to see the preacher as well as to hear him, and the essence of Ezra's preaching was simply the reading, the expounding and the explaining of the Word of God. Ezra's s preaching was not a performance, nor a literary exercise, nor an excuse to show the people how widely read in theology he was, nor how many names he could drop in the pattern of "As ... so and so says." This man Ezra was aware that he was nothing more and nothing less than a servant of God and of His Word. He had a stewardship of the Word committed to him and he was concerned to be faithful, as were those who assisted him (1Cor. 3:1-8; 4:1-2). Remember that Ezra had for some time been in the background leaving Nehemiah to do the tasks that were required at that stage in the work. Now the preacher took his place at the front, and it may well have been that Nehemiah had sent for Ezra just, as in another situation Barnabas sent for Paul (Acts 11:21-26). It takes a truly humble man to recognise his own limitations and to recognise and rejoice in the capacities of another.

Back to Top

8:4-8

The Word of God is central to worship and it is as the Word is desired, listened to, received and responded to that we do in fact worship God. We do well to consider to what extent and in what spirit we do in fact worship God. What we read here about the people gathering in unison was in fact something quite in accord with the Word of God (Duet.31:7-13). So it was by the Word they were quickened and by the Word they were instructed, blessed and satisfied. The Word of God is living and powerful (Heb.4:12-13); it is the sword which the Spirit uses (Eph. 6:17); it carries its own dynamic when it is preached (1 Thess. 2:13); it is by the Word that faith is awakened (Rom.10:17). When it is proclaimed it accomplishes the plan and purpose of God (Isa.55:10-11). In all the work of God He stands guard over His own Word (Jer.1:12) and this is the assurance of every preacher. The Word of God has also a washing and cleansing function (Eph.5:26) and it is the food of believers from spiritual childhood to spiritual maturity (1 Pet.1:23-2:2; Heb.5:11-14). That last reference indicates how we can become dull of hearing so that the work of the preacher becomes more difficult and we do not receive the Word in faith (Heb.4:1-2). The Word of God can be resisted, and we must not be surprised when unbelievers do this. The "natural" man does not receive the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14 AV). But when the people of God resist the Word and when they put pressure on God's prophets to keep them from preaching, then we have a situation that is solemn indeed (Amos 2: 11-12). What a terrible thing it is when someone who claims to belong to God breaks the heart, the spirit and the ministry of a prophet.

Back to Top

8:9-12

Nehemiah and Ezra were a great partnership in the service of God, and just as Nehemiah gave place to Ezra in the matter of preaching, so Ezra was glad to have him back in a front place in the matter of pastoral guidance

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and care. The preaching had resulted in a great wave of emotion which had to be checked and redirected. There can be a cold and clinical listening to the preaching of the Word with hearts never being touched. But there can be a reaction that is merely emotional and never touches the will or changes the behaviour. Now emotion can be channelled, but coldness of heart is a dead thing. The people wept, no doubt being convicted of their sins (Rom. 3:20); being made aware of how far they and their fathers had slipped spiritually; realising how far short they were of being what they should be and could be for God; and, no doubt being freshly aware of the longsuffering and generous kindness of their God. We also need to become aware of how good and kind God has been to us (Rom. 2:4). The people wept because of a great sense of unworthiness but, while this is a good and a necessary reaction, it must not be the final reaction. The Devil will be quite happy if we simply wallow in a sense of regret and spend endless hours thinking and praying about our sins. This kind of sorrow is non-productive (2 Cor.7:9-11). Repentance, if it is real, makes us sorry enough to stop what is wrong and to put our lives right in a positive way. When the people were told not to weep, there was no suggestion that sin and failure did not matter. But there was another side to the situation, as we shall see tomorrow. Here the problem was emotion. What would the issue be? Would there be action?
Back to Top

8:9-12

Emotion in the context of the preaching of the Good News can be real or deceptive; a true spiritual reaction or simply an indulgent one. Think this way: steam can blow a whistle or it can drive an engine. Ezra and Nehemiah urged the people to do something positive with their new found spiritual emotion, reminding them that the joy of the Lord was a strengthening thing (10). The joy of the Lord is not just what we experience in a situation of spiritual renewal and re-dedication, but also what the Lord Himself experiences as His people come back to Him. If there is joy in Heaven over a sinner repenting (Lk.15:7), is there not also joy in the Father's heart when prodigals return home (Lk.15:20-24)? Having been brought to penitence, the people were now encouraged to rejoice in God and then to go out into the world as evangelists of God's good news and good gifts, recognising that there are many for whom there is nothing. This is an exhortation we must always remember when we are in a place of spiritual privilege and authentic ministry. We must not become either complacent or selfish. But note also how the people were told to enjoy their God in all His goodness and gifts. It is an invitation to sit at God's banqueting table (Song of Sol. 2:4). How we need to be reminded of the God who provides rivers of pleasure for His people (Ps.16:11; 36:8)! Did not Jesus also speak of His desire that our lives should be abundant and our joys full (Jn.10:10; 15:11)? It is as we delight in God and learn to enjoy Him that we begin to live lives that glorify Him. This, as the Catechism says, is the chief end of man.
Back to Top

8:13-18

The whole of this chapter could be divided in terms of the Word of God (1-8); the result of the Word (9-12); and the continuance of the Word (13-18). Note how the people, led by the heads of the families, having heard the Word and tasted its blessing now desired to study the Word, that is to get a firmer hold on it. They wanted to know more about God's Word so that they might know God better, and so learn more clearly what His will for them was. Almost at once they discovered that obedience to the Word was the thing needed. Their lives had to be conformed to the pattern of the Word of God and not to the pattern and fashion of the world (Rom.12:1-2). The people discovered something that had been absent from their lives and their worship. They realised they needed a constant reminder that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth and that God had provided the means to cope with this in the pattern of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:33-43). This is a great corrective to the spirit of the world that can so easily trap us in materialism and make us forget the world to come. We have a similar reminder of eternal things every Communion Service when we hear the words, "Until He come". This reminder that we are in fact "marching to Zion" is echoed in the New Testament in such places as Heb.11:13-16; 1 Pet.1:3-9; 2:11; 2 Cor. 4:16-18. Think of the impact made on the people in Jerusalem, and on those of surrounding nations, when people left their homes and their comforts to live in tents made of branches. It would be a reminder, and a necessary one, that a man's life does not consist of the things he possesses (Lk. 12:15ff.). Note that the emphasis was not on sacrifice but on rejoicing (17).
Back to Top

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9:1-5

This whole chapter gives a wonderful summary of and an inspired commentary on the history of the people of God, that is the story of God's dealing with His people in the interest of their salvation. As we go through it day by day we could read similar surveys in Psalms 105, 106 and Acts 7:1-53. The chapter seems to have two main themes. In v.1-15 we have a declaration of the nature and character of God and of His salvation. In v.16-38 we have a declaration of the gracelessness and perversity of human nature as it is seen in the Israelites. This double exposure, linked with the spirit of repentance evidenced in v.1-2, led in the end to the people pledging themselves in a new dedication to God. We will look at the various sections of the chapter but we must remember that what we read of here follows on from the return to and the renewal of the ministry of the Word of God as recorded in chapter 8. Note also that the emotion and rejoicing of 8:9-12 were not the final or permanent fruit of the preaching of God's Word. There had to emerge from that the spirit of repentance, testimony, worship and consecration. The theme of v.1-5 is that of consecration. They confessed their sins and failures, but in doing so they recognised themselves as the people of God, a chosen people, called to be a unique people (1 Pet. 2:9-10). They were called to stand up and bless the Lord; to take their stand publicly and declare that they were God's people; and to have done with lesser things so that they could rise to their high and holy calling. This is what it means to be God's chosen people (Eph.1:3-10).
Back to Top

9:6-8

The last sentence of v.5 needs to be read along with these verses which have as their theme the majesty of God. The mighty men of faith in all generations, those who have done significant work for God, have all had a deep sense of the grandeur of God. Read Ps.72:17-19; Isa. 40:9-12, 18, 21-23, 25-26, 28-31. But it is not just God's person that is in view but His plan, power and providence, because He is sovereign in every way. He is God alone. He speaks and it is done (Gen.1:3). He works and who can hinder (Isa.43:13). Read v.6 and marvel that this is the God of our salvation, the God whom we serve. Such is His power that there is nothing in all creation that can possibly have the power to separate us from His love (Rom.8:35-39). This is the God who chose Abraham and committed Himself to Abraham, and having done so never once looked back. What a declaration Ezra gave concerning God. He is the God who fulfils His promises and does so in perfect righteousness (Gen.18:25). He is the God who is totally dependable, saying to His people that all He has planned for them will be theirs, even though it may come by costly ways. Read Gen.28:15 and Phil.1:6. Now go through today's verses and mark the repetition of the words "You" and "Yours". There is a great preoccupation with God in His person and power. This is the secret of peace, purpose and perseverance. All too often we get our thoughts and feelings fixed on circumstances, people, problems, ourselves and the Devil. Little wonder we get distracted! We have made God too small. We need to bless His glorious Name and to see Him as He really is. This is what Paul does in Rom.11:33-36.
Back to Top

9:9-15

Ezra's declaration goes on to speak of the wonders God has worked for His people. How easily we forget this when we are struggling and feeling cast down. Think where we would be and what we would be apart from the grace of God that laid hold on us and kept hold of us. Think of how good it is for us to sing, for example, the Metrical Versions of Psalms 96, 98, and 145. The great hymns of the faith likewise call us to ponder and give thanks when we sing, "Praise my soul the King of Heaven." ... "Father-like He tends and spares us ...". This is what Ezra says. God saw the affliction of His people (9). He is not an insensitive or indifferent God, nor is He remote from His people. In all their distress He was distressed (Isa. 63:9). He divided the sea when they thought they were finished and at the mercy of their enemies (11). He led them safely, condescending to their weakness and giving them the visible sign and token of His presence (12). God came down to them on Sinai with the good word of His grace and law to bless them (13). He gave them the Sabbath, to be a blessing not a burden and inhibition, and to give them the time and opportunity to get spiritual things into right focus after a week of struggling with the world (14). He fed them with good and sufficient food, giving them day by day their daily bread so that they lacked nothing (15). And God pointed them forward to the land of life and rest and blessing and fulness. There was nothing that God did not do for His people and all because He loved them with an everlasting love. Even when they were determined to backslide from Him He could not and would not give

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them up (Hos.11:7-9; 14:4 AV). Do not fail to note also that God personally made it His business to deal with evil people who stood against His loved ones.
Back to Top

9:16-25

This passage begins with the ominous word, “But”. Ezra had spoken about how great God is, how good, how faithful He had been to His people and how He had cared for them, but they had not responded (Isa. 63:8-10). In fact they had been totally and persistently graceless, proud and disobedient. Once they felt themselves a little bit established they wanted to be independent. They forgot that all they were and had they owed to God's grace and goodness (1 Cor. 4:6-7). They showed their contempt for their God-given leader Moses, referring to him as "this fellow Moses" (Ex. 32:1), and were all set to return to Egypt. But, in spite of all that, God did not cast them off. God held to His great faithfulness and renewed to them the daily mercies and provisions they needed all through their wilderness journeys (Lam. 3:22-24). Note the reference to the active ministry of the Holy Spirit (20) and remember that He is God's continuous and unfettered worker right down the ages of history from the first moments of creation. Some tend nowadays to speak of the Holy Spirit, His graces and gifts, as if He was only discovered in this century. Such people have a very limited concept of the doctrine of the Spirit. There is a tremendous picture in these verses of God as the great shepherd of His people (Isa.40:11), leading them onward to pastures of rest and provision in spite of all their tendency to wander. In many different ways His provision was miraculous: not just the manna and water from the rock, but the amazing experience of how long their shoes and clothes lasted without wearing out. Many a Christian could testify that this has been so with them. At times there may be no luxuries, but God's people lack no good thing (Ps. 34:10; Lk. 22:35).
Back to Top

9:16-25

It is good to be reminded of all God has done for us and given to us, not least to awaken in us the grace of thanksgiving, without which our prayer life would be hindered (Phil.4:4-7). Remember also that the absence of a spirit of thanksgiving (to God and to man) is one of the marks of moral and spiritual apostasy mentioned in Rom.1:21. In v.22-25 we are told of how God gave His people possessions, and increase, and victories, and identity. Their God was eager to give them the best of blessings in fullest possible measure, and all because He loved them. God is not a spoilsport who finds pleasure in denying His children every possible fulfilment. Indeed, Jesus said He had come so that we might have life and joy in fullest measure (John.10:10). Paul said the same kind of thing to Timothy (1 Tim. 6:17-19) in an age when there was a false idea of sanctification and dedication (1 Tim. 4:1-5). We are supposed to enjoy God and all the rightful and legitimate pleasures He gives. He will give us what we can be trusted with and we must learn to be content with what He gives and what He withholds (Prov. 30:7-9; Phil, 4:10-12). Yes, we have to learn contentment, and it is only possible when our hearts are set on God (1 Tim. 6:6-9). The warning hinted at at the end of today's verses is highlighted in the next verse in the word "But". What a tragedy it is when God's people become spiritually fat and lazy, so busy enjoying the good gifts of His grace that they forget the great Giver of every gift (Jas.1:17). Think of it this way: there is a danger in having too much of a rich and satisfying ministry unless it inspires us to be more out-going and out-giving in service because we love God.
Back to Top

9:26-31

Both the first and last verses of this passage begin with the word “But” (“Nevertheless” in other versions). The story tells of the perversity of God's own people and the almost unbelievable patience of God with them. There is something quite startling about v.26. Can God's true people ever really behave like this? Read the stories of the Book of Judges and see how, in fact, they did just this again and again. Then go to 1 Cor.10:6-13 and be warned that our own hearts could quite easily lead us astray just like this. The heart is deceitful and diseased (Jer. 17:9) and even in the life of the believer the flesh wars against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh (Gal. 5:16-17). It is only as we do to death the desires and deeds of the flesh that we live (Rom. 8:13). Of course, God has His methods whereby He disciplines His children in order to separate them from their sins (27). If we are not to despise the Father's chastisements (Heb.12:5-11) then we need to ask ourselves what God is saying to us and teaching us in the things that are happening to us. Sometimes others will actually tell us what God is saying and will tell our friends and colleagues how to deal with us for our good. In some senses the New

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Testament is more solemn than the Old Testament, especially if we take 1 Cor. 5:1-5 seriously. Sin is a disaster in the life of a believer and radical surgery is often needed to save lives. The sad thing in today's passage is how quickly and how often after being rescued, forgiven and restored, the people returned to their former easy and careless indulgence. How often have we promised God that this time we have learned our lesson and that we would dedicate our lives afresh? What a mercy that we have a gracious and merciful God who does not forsake us or give us up. Think well of God's grace that has brought you to this day and points you to the future.
Back to Top

9:32-37

Before considering the significance of v.32-33 go through the passage carefully and note how the prayer ends with a reference to the people's condition of slavery or limitation in the land of promise. It is difficult to know the exact meaning of this but the passage does seem to refer to lost opportunities and forfeited blessing. It seems that in prayer Ezra is acknowledging just how different things *could* have been but for the spiritual shallowness and disobedience of the people of God. God does forgive and restore, even to such an extent that it seems there has been no waste. That is the significance of the restoring of the years the locust has eaten (Joel 2:25). But, at the same time, we must see that in a real sense past wasted years cannot be recalled, not least because we all grow older and are not able to do what we once were able to do. This is why we must redeem the time and “buy up the moments as they go” (Eph. 5:16 AV). Note that this great prayer with its deep sense of shame and of desire to be right with God stemmed from the reading, preaching and hearing of the Word of God as recorded in the previous chapter. The people had become aware of God in a new way. Look at the different descriptions of God in v.32. Note how Ezra calls Him "Our God", great, mighty, awesome (not to be trifled with), covenant-keeping God of steadfast love. Even when His people are faithless He remains faithful (2 Tim. 2:13). He will grieve over His people and be hurt by their gracelessness, but He will not disown them. In v.32b Ezra asks God to feel for them in all that has come upon them, as if he is saying, “Please God, do not be indifferent.” It may be that Ezra is recalling the words of God in Exod. 3:7. God hears our cries when we are upset. He knows what we are like and He never forgets our limitations (Ps.103:13-14). In all our affliction God is afflicted (Isa. 63:9AV).
Back to Top

9:32-37

These verses are so very personal that we must stay with them another day. There is recognition in v.33 that God has been totally just and right in all His dealings with His people. They had deserved and needed all that had happened to them. They, and their fathers before them, had not listened to what God had been saying, no matter by what messengers they had been instructed, and no matter how seriously they had been spoken to (34). They had not served their God even though they had been living in the context of His rich grace (35). Nor had they laid hold on all the possibilities of service which God had opened up before them (35). There is a great cry from Ezra's heart as to what *could* have been, if only they had been willing and obedient. But at the same time both Ezra and the people had a sense of still being God's people. They did not say in self-pity, “Why has this happened to us?” but rather they acknowledged that if God had dealt with them in exact retribution then their condition and situation would have been far worse (Ps.103:10;130:1-8). But note that the penitence in this prayer is not only concerned with the personal distress and regrets of the people. In v.37 it is the work of God that is suffering because of the wrongs of the people. The rich yield which rightly belonged to God was going to others. Think of this in terms of the on-going work of the church. What yield do we look for? Should we not be seeing sinners gathered to Christ and so seeing the Lord adding to the church in its on-going ministry those who are being saved (Acts 2:47)? It is solemn to think that we ourselves may be the barrier to God's gracious working. Disobedience hides the Gospel and robs it of its power in respect of those who most need to hear it. That is the burden of Paul's words in 2 Cor. 4:1-7. If we are to be channels of God's blessing to others we must be clean channels. The people now wanted to be just that, as we see tomorrow.
Back to Top

9:38-10:31

This long passage, which takes several days to study, is the account of a new dedication to God and it follows right on from the review of their past history (9:38). They had drawn the contrast between what they were and what they might have been and, recognising the fickleness of their own hearts, they were aware of what they

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might become yet again. They had acquired a godly fear of sin, recognising that it was not to be trifled with. Therefore, in a sense, it was for their own future safety that they wanted to be realistic with God. They had learned, and we must learn, that we never reach the stage when old sins, tendencies and temptations lose their power. We are not referring only to obvious crashing into sin, but also to the strange dullness of spirit that can so easily creep in on us. This is why we need to discipline ourselves to keep close to God and to keep short accounts with God. There comes a time when in an open and public way we must take our stand and make it perfectly clear whose we are and whom we serve. Such a declaration is both a testimony and a challenge. We say to the world, to the church and to our own families, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:14-15). We are given a list of the names of the leaders of the people who signed this "solemn league and covenant". The only comment we make is to ask ourselves if we would have been well up the queue waiting to sign and to enter into this new commitment to the God who had saved, blessed and forgiven us again and again. There comes a time in the work of God when, if things have been allowed to slide, and we now long to see God's saving power as we once saw it, that the challenge has to be made as Moses once made it in Ex. 32:26. The leader of God's people has the right to say: “Who is on the Lord's side, let him come unto me.” Every work needs to be led, and it may be that this day's reading is a call from God to some to be more loyal to their minister or pastor.

Back to Top

9:38-10:31

Note the details of this new and firm covenant. The people gave themselves to God with a new sense of fellowship, all ages and classes being together, and they did so with a new affirmation of their identity as a people for God's own possession (1 Pet. 2: 9-10). They acknowledged that they were not in any sense their own, because they were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19-20). This is not to be thought of as a great surrender but rather as a privilege, and when we reach this stage there comes a sense of relief because the basic things of life are once again in true focus. Note the double nature of the commitment. They separated themselves from all the things and people that would hinder or contradict their calling, and they gave themselves to God. A consecration that is merely negative, concerned only with stopping things, can prove disastrous and lead to the last state being worse than the first (Lk.11:24-26). An empty life is not a holy life. Life needs to be filled with Christ. Note also that there was a renewed commitment to the Law of God; a new realism with regard to the Word of God; a new listening to and meeting with God as He spoke to them. The people were in earnest, and they knew full well that a lot of their problems stemmed from wrong relationships in the areas of romance and marriage. It is here so often that our lives are either opened up to God or closed down to God. It is not just a case of believers not marrying unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-18). That should be obvious. But Christian marriage is much more than just two Christians getting married. The two must be given to each other by God and the proof of the right relationship will be that the partners will encourage and enable each other to be all they should be and could be for God. They will never allow each other to settle for less than God's best. This is what it means to be a "helpmeet" (Gen. 2:18 AV).

Back to Top

9:38-10:31

This commitment to God is something which will also govern all our business relationships and all our activities, not least in terms of the Sabbath. What we do with our Sundays is not incidental. We are under obligation to keep them holy (Exod. 20:8-11) and there are particular promises of blessing if we do (Isa.58:13-14). Note in v.31 that the people were aware of how easy it is for the people of the unbelieving world to intrude into and to impose their life patterns on believers. This is something we must resist, graciously but firmly, otherwise our Sundays will slowly but surely be taken away from us. We are seeing this before our eyes today and the secular spirit of our generation is openly contemptuous and critical of those who, in God's name, seek to preserve this holy day. Even Christians nowadays seem to think that once morning service is over the rest of the day is their own to use as they please. What we all tend to forget is that we need this God-ordained "one-day-in-seven" in order to focus our hearts and lives again on God. We need to be reminded that this world is not our home and that we are in fact strangers and pilgrims whose citizenship is in Heaven (Heb.11:13; 1 Pet.2:11; Phil.3:20). We acknowledge that there is a legalistic and arbitrary observance of the Sabbath, with some things allowed and others not, more by man's tradition than God's command. That does not honour God. The Sabbath was made for man's help and blessing, as Jesus told the legalistic Pharisees (Mk. 2:27). But there is also an evil

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devaluation of the Sabbath whereby it is kept officially but misused (Amos 8:4-6). The end of v.31 refers back to Lev. 22:1-7 and Deut. 15:1-6. When we do things God's way we are blessed. Life is really very simple.
Back to Top

10:32-39

Spiritual dedication is very practical and if we are to do right by God then we have to do right in terms of money. In our passage, remember that the people of God were at this time under pressure and were by no means in a stable or affluent economic situation. What they were pledging themselves to do, taking it on themselves as an obligation (35), would involve a real degree of sacrifice. But they pledged themselves to provide for every detailed aspect of the ongoing worship of God's House and all its work (34). It is quite remarkable to see the extent of their "giving" under the Old Covenant. There is reference to offerings (32), firstfruits (35) and tithes (37). It was an obvious recognition that God's claim on their resources came first. This is the pattern for all Christian giving, whether of money or time. God comes first and, according to 2 Cor. 9:7, the Lord loves a cheerful giver. The Greek word for "cheerful" is literally "hilarious" and indicates that true Christian giving will always have an element of the generous about it. This does not mean we should be foolish or impulsive in our giving. We are to be good stewards of all that God gives us (1 Pet. 4:10) and that calls for thought, planning and a systematic pattern of giving so that, the work of God does not find itself faced with recurring crises that call for "special." efforts. There should be a regular re-assessment of our financial commitment to God's work, first in respect of the congregations of which we are a part and then in respect of our wider responsibilities. To be spiritual in this area of life is not to deny being practical. This is why it is wise to make rightful use of any concessions made by governments, such as Deeds of Covenant. If we claim our other personal tax allowances (and few decline them) we should also claim God's tax allowances. Look at the last statement in our passage.
Back to Top

10:32-39

This passage is so detailed and so challenging in the matter of financial commitment to the work of God that we do well today to read quickly the whole of 2 Cor. 8-9 where Paul deals with Christian giving without actually mentioning money. Both the Old and New Testaments speak of planned and systematic giving to provide for God's house and work. Today's passage speaks various types of offerings and indicates that whatever the source and nature of the income, the rightful share belonged to God. But note the realism of the people. In v.32 their commitment was a third of a shekel, whereas in Exod. 30:13 and Matt.17:24 the statutory amount was a half shekel. Consider the wisdom of 2 Cor. 8:12-15. There is nothing legalistic here, because circumstances change, and at times some are able to take a greater burden and some are rightly eased of their burden. Of course, if we are foolish in our spending, that does not excuse neglect of our Christian giving. It is interesting to note that in Exod.30:13-15 the Temple Tax was not based on "ability to pay" but was the same for everyone so that all had the same dignity and the same responsibility. The givings of the poor were not in any sense defective, and the givings of the rich were not in any sense special. All stood on the same ground before God. This applies to all kinds of "gifts", whether spiritual or of personality or talent. No one member of God’s "body"(the church) can do without the other (1 Cor.12:14-22). It is not what we have or what we give that counts, but the spirit and the sacrifice that counts. It is God who makes the evaluation. That is what Jesus said in Mark 12:41-44.
Back to Top

10:32-39

We must not fail to see in this passage that seems unpromising at first that the whole life of the nation and its people centred on the worship of the House of God. There is reference to service (32), work (33), altar service (34), gate-keepers and singers (39). What a variety of tasks for a whole variety of people! But all the work was governed by and directed to doing the will and work of God. This is the kind of "one track mind" that is gloriously liberating and fulfilling. Hearts and lives that are fixed on God are the salvation of the nation and the church within it. This is not in any sense fanatical or extreme, and it is totally New Testament in its emphasis. Think of Paul's whole evaluation of the things in his life and how he spoke of "This one thing I do ..." (Phil. 3:7-14). Let our hearts settle finally on v.34 and the casting of lots for the privilege of gathering wood to keep the altar fire burning. The altar is the place where the people met with God. In the story of Elijah it was the broken down and neglected altar that had to be rebuilt before there could be a future for the nation (1 Kings

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18:30). It is vital to keep the flame burning. Maintain the spiritual glow (Rom. 12:11 Moffat). Keep fuelling the fire. Is it not right to see here some reference or application to the centrality of prayer? Is it not thrilling to know there are people who can be depended on to keep the prayer life of the congregation alive and healthy? How sad it is when so many who claim to be "consecrated" to God persistently hold back from sharing in the prayer life of the congregation. How sad and grieved God must be. Let us be quite clear, the personal fire will not be maintained without sharing in the communal fire. We cannot be truly spiritual on our own. Read again the very last statement of v.39. God first. His House and His work first. This is the way of life.
Back to Top

11:1-18

We divide this chapter into two sections simply because apart from v.1-2 there seems to be little for our daily study. Lists of names do not convey much unless we know something about the people. But these lists of names do put on record the fact that these were people who by choice and conviction made themselves part of the ongoing work of God. They took their stand and played their part and were not absent from the place of duty. We will understand v.1-2 better if we refer back to 7:4-5. The Temple had been built, the walls of the city finished, and Nehemiah was now looking to the future continuance of the work of God. He realised the need for Jerusalem, the heart of the work, to be secure and stable and he began to take the necessary steps to make it so. To have the leaders of the work alone in the city was not enough. It never is, in the life of the church. If it is left to the minister and some of the elders, or to the minister and some of the women, or to the minister and some of the older people without the young people, to do the praying, that is to serve at the heart of the work, then the future is not secure. Perhaps in our generation we have been obsessively concerned to *provide* for the young and should instead have been asking more from them in terms of commitment to spiritual service, especially in those areas where spiritual battle and not pleasure is the dominant thing. Think of how many Christians of all ages enthuse about and give themselves to all manner of interests and hobbies, but whose reluctance in respect of the prayer life of the church is almost total. What Nehemiah is calling for in v.1-2 is volunteers to take their places in the front-line of the spiritual battle. In fact, he did not wait for volunteers, there was conscription of one out of every ten!
Back to Top

11:1-18

What would the reaction be in modern congregations if people were *told* that they *had* to change their life style in order to be front-line spiritual warriors? It could be that our verses indicate that it was one in ten of the volunteers who went to stay in Jerusalem and, when we consider what that involved, we can understand why the people blessed them. It meant commitment to the work with no going back. It meant commitment to a way of life narrower than that which others enjoyed. There was little or no trade in Jerusalem and therefore less of the world's benefits. Think of this whenever we feel virtuous about praying for missionaries and giving a donation for their support. That is much easier than sharing their way of life and sharing the cost in respect of their children. The volunteers were accepting a way of life in which they would always be secondary to the work. Think of Jesus' words about putting our hand to the plough and looking back, and also His words about forsaking all in order to be a disciple (Lk. 9:62; 14:32). We tend to make many concessions for ourselves. But think of the effect of that on others. The need for a strong, fortified "Jerusalem" was in order to give reassurance and encouragement to all the little isolated settlements in the wider area. They would look to the city and be reminded that they were not on their own. This is something those of us who are in larger, stronger and longer established churches need to remember. We have a duty to be strong and to be faithful in prayer for the sake of those who look to us and who trust us to be their prayer partners. We must not ever give the impression that we sit complacently in the safety of our "Jerusalem". That means we must keep contact with the new spiritual "settlements" to encourage and inspire, not least by reminding them of the battles that had to be fought before our place was built. It has taken thirty years and more of costly service to make the Sandyford congregation what it is by the grace of God.
Back to Top

11:1-18

These unpromising verses are yielding spiritual instruction. Think of the widely spread villages occupied by the Jews and trace (if so inclined) the geographical spread from Beersheba northwards. Now think of all we have

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read of Sanballat and his colleagues who had harried the work so resolutely in the earlier days. Where were they now? They were still there. Why were they not attacking the work? The answer is finally found in the sovereignty of God (Prov.16:7-9; Ps.21:11-12; Rev.17:17). Evil is never free to do what it wants. Evil is allowed to operate only to carry out the will of God. Think how Judas was commanded to do his evil work at the exact time, and how he immediately went and did it (John 13:27). Sanballat and all his willing helpers were subdued by the strength of Jerusalem, and the little places dwelt secure under the shadow of Zion. How we need to pray for a strong church in our own generation. Nothing but that will curb the arrogant powers of evil that are bent on poisoning and destroying society. There is another aspect to the clear, visible strength of Jerusalem and it concerns all we mean by outreach, evangelism and missionary service. If the strength and vitality of the home church begin to wane; if the prayer life of the home church flags; and if the people of God fail to see that the work of God is one work, world-wide and continuing down through history, then decline is inevitable. As we look to each other we must more and more take to ourselves the great words of Jesus in John 17:18-19. Note last of all the reference in v.17 to thanksgiving and prayer and consider Paul's words in Phil. 4:4-7. How sad it is when Christian people are so graceless that they never express thanks to God or to others for blessings human and spiritual. There is no doubt that a conscious spirit of thanksgiving has a wonderful influence on our prayer life. Think of the people you know who have a buoyant freshness about their Christian lives. You will find that they are always thanking God for His goodness.

Back to Top

11:19-36

There are two inspiring thoughts in v.22-24. The first has to do with the singers whose business it was to lead the people in the praise of God, and special provision was made for them. This expression of praise was, and still is, an important part of worship. It is a true means of grace and blessing when God's people gather together and bless their God in songs of praise, adoration and thanksgiving. God does indeed "inhabit" the praises of His people and when our praises are God-centred rather than experience-centred, when the words and music are worthy, substantial in truth rather than merely repetitive, then we are truly engaged in worship. We do not have to generate feelings of worship but we become aware of God amongst His people. In Psalm 22:3, the A.V. speaks of God *inhabiting* the praises of His people, but the verse is better translated that God is *enthroned* on the praises of His people. Now, when God is lifted up in this way, worship becomes a new and living experience which has two important results. It makes God's people eager to hear God's Word. There is a fashion today of engaging in a kind of worship which displaces God's Word as if it was unnecessary or even irrelevant. But this is not biblical or spiritual worship. If we are truly dealing with God our deepest desire will be to hear what God wants to say to us. The other result of true praise is a witness to and an impact on unbelieving people who have come to the church service. They become aware of being in the company of people who obviously believe in a real God who is worthy to be praised. We all have a lot to learn about singing to the Lord with joyful hearts even though we may have limited musical ability.

Back to Top

11:19-36

Following on from the theme of worship and relating it to the whole of Christian life and service, we should allow v.24, which speaks of a man who was the king's agent, or at the king's hand, to lead our thoughts to our Lord Jesus Christ. He is our great High Priest and Advocate, who is the Man who stands at the throne of God on our behalf. What a backing we have! What an assurance and encouragement this should be to us. Consider the verses in Rom. 8:34; Heb.9:24; 1John 2:1 and keep in mind that for all our Christian service as well as our personal lives we have at all times the backing of the Throne. Note also that it was one of their own flesh and blood who stood before the king. It was a man who had shared their human situation and who understood all its feelings and temptations who now represented them before the king. This is tremendously important. The one who pleads our cause is not some far off unfeeling "official" so remote in the higher reaches of government that he has forgotten what life is really like at the "front line". Our great Representative is touched with the feeling of our weaknesses and has known what it is to be beleaguered and pressurised by temptations. Read Heb. 2:14-18; 4:14-16. We cannot think of these things too often, and such meditation reminds us of the "sympathising Jesus". Those familiar with the Scottish Paraphrase 48 should read all the verses beginning, "Where high the heavenly temple stands .... a great High Priest our nature wears, the Guardian of mankind appears." What a Man stands guard over us day by day. What confidence and hope we should have. "He who for men their surety

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stood, And poured on earth His precious blood, Pursues in heaven His mighty plan, the Saviour and the Friend of man." Never forget the Man in the presence of the Throne.
Back to Top

12:1-26

Another list of names need not weary us, so long as we remember that these were people of like feelings, limitations and capacities as ourselves. Never think that only the great and gifted are of use in the front line of God's work. Not many mighty are called and it pleases God to take up and use those the world would consider to be weak and even useless (1 Cor. 1:26-29). God does have His great and gifted characters and leaders for whom we give thanks. There are unique leaders raised up at significant times as the catalogue of the Heroes of the Faith (Heb. 11) makes plain. But not one of these great characters was perfect and that most practical of New Testament writers, James, records for us that mighty Elijah was a man of similar nature to ourselves (Jas. 5:17). The Old Testament story with equal honesty records Elijah's confusion, depression and fear as well as his mighty faith and service. Here, in todays seemingly dull passage, we have in v.24 encouragement and counsel in respect of our Christian work. Twice we have reference to those serving opposite each other and section responding to section. The work was not done on an individualistic basis but in partnership, each backing up the other. No doubt there was some sort of "team" organisation so that different people with different qualities and capacities complemented each other. This is far wiser and safer than groups whose only coherence is on the basis of liking each other or being in the same social or financial class, or the same age group. But note also that all the work and worship was according to the commandment of David. It was not "free" ideas of service and worship. It had to be the way God had commanded it. This is how churches are built to last and to be bulwarks against evil. This is the kind of church against which the gates of Hell cannot stand (Matt. 16:16-18).
Back to Top

12:27-30

These verses introduce the narrative of the ritual of the dedication of the completed walls of Jerusalem, and the rest of the chapter will tell us what a truly impressive and exciting celebration it was. This was a peak point in the development of the work but we must refer back to v.1-26 in order to see clearly that this achievement was not the result of the work of those who had completed the last stages. This is an error we often fall into. We become very aware of what *we* have done in our little time of service forgetting the wise words of Jesus in John 4:37-38 that others have laboured before us and we have entered into their labours. There is a great danger in young spiritual enthusiasts forgetting the hard slog of an older generation who may have had little to show for their labours but who laid the foundations on which the younger generation have been able to build. There are many church people who would not have been considered very spiritual (or spiritual at all), who by their efforts kept a church in existence so that in the fullness of God's timing that church could become a stronghold of biblical, evangelical and spiritual ministry. We sin against God and against such people when we despise and discount their service. Time will tell whether or not we are prepared to work as hard and to be as loyal as they were to their church so that the next generation will have something to build on. In chap. 12:1 we are taken right back to the time of Zerubbabel and in 12:26 we are at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The list of names therefore spans a century and down the years all of those, named and unnamed, had had a part to play in making possible this glorious dedication. That is something to marvel at.
Back to Top

12:31-43

After the ritual and significant purification in v.27-30, whereby the holiness of God's work was testified to, the celebration procession got under way. The focus of the whole event was the wall of the city which encircled the Temple and the people of God. We cannot but think of the words we love to sing,

"With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou mayest smile at all thy foes." (Newton)

You can imagine the people singing to the effect that their God was their rock, refuge and defence. Think how often that is the theme of the Psalms. We need to remind ourselves of this again and again so that our confidence will be strengthened. The over-all theme of the "march" was praise and thanksgiving, a recognition

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and a confession that all that had been accomplished had been by the all sufficient and unchanging grace of their God. The two halves of the procession, having gone round the walls in clockwise and anti-clockwise directions, met in the Temple area, the House of God (40). This was not accidental. It was planned as a testimony and a declaration. No matter how comprehensive, demanding and successful the work is, we need to remember that God is the heart and focus of it all. It is never *our* work. It is God's work and all the praise, honour and glory must be deliberately and consciously given to Him and to Him alone. Think of some of the great doxologies in the New Testament: Rom.11:33-36; 1 Cor.15:24-28; Eph.3:20-21; Jude 24-25. Think also of the end of the Lord's prayer, words we tend to say so easily that we miss their wonder, "Thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory, for ever." Little wonder it is recorded in v.43 that the people rejoiced. They could see before their eyes the victory God had given them.
Back to Top

12:31-43

Most people who read these notes will go to church and we need to remind ourselves that whether the building and people be great or small, in obvious victory or in apparent decline and defeat, our God reigns and His Kingdom has no end (Ps. 145:10-21). We must not allow ourselves to be deceived or demoralised by appearances. Jesus affirmed to doubting Thomas that those are blessed indeed who believe even though they cannot see the proof of the victory (John 20:29). God gives His people the victory, and this is the basis and the inspiration of our ongoing service (1 Cor.15:57-58). The way may be costly and tearful, but the Psalmist is sure that the "returns" will be great and a cause for rejoicing (Ps.126:1-6). Now, this kind of faith and rejoicing simply cannot be hidden, as v.43 declares. Confidence in God, and worship centred on and directed to Him, is a mighty evangelistic power. If the people of God in our churches today were in fact rejoicing in their God in this way there would be an impact on society and there would be a drawing in of many people. Without being distracted by the unusual manifestations (which are not of the essence of the story and not to be looked for or copied) read Acts 2:1-11. This is exactly what happened in the story of Nehemiah. The joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off and the reality of the spiritual work simply could not be concealed or ignored. It spoke for itself. It could be called effort-less evangelism. It was certainly witness without frenzied and exhausting activity. Now read Zech. 8:20-23, verses we should be familiar with and which should make us pray, "Lord make us such obvious Christians that people will be drawn."
Back to Top

12:44-47

These simple verses are really quite thrilling when you think that they give a picture of what we would call church life. The essence of it all was the service of their God (45) and this was far more than just the ritual of the services, even though it was important that everything should be done in the way God had ordered that it should be done. There is a right way and a wrong way to worship God and in all our services, and our service, we must see to it that all is done decently and in order (1 Cor.14:40). Confusion, carelessness and casualness are not to be thought of as marks of spirituality. Nor is novelty or change to be exalted into a "higher" value of spirituality. The past is not to be despised or ignored, except where the past has departed from the clear pattern and instruction of God's Word. In v.44-45 there is clear evidence of a determination to do things now in the way they were done in David's day when the presence and power of God were manifestly among His people. Go through these verses and see the elements of praise, thanksgiving, joy and joyful service. What a congregation that must have been to be part of in worship and in practical service. See how much it was a thing of joy to give their tithes. The Lord loves cheerful givers (2 Cor.9:7), who give of their substance and time in a way that is sacrificial. And, what is more, cheerful givers are those who find most joy in their Christian lives. Think again of how much there is in the Psalter of fullness of and glorious pleasures for the people who go with their God (Ps.16:11;105:43). Note last of all that the whole nation rejoiced in this new establishment of spiritual, God-centred, God-glorifying ministry and worship (44). 0 Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years and make Thy people rejoice in Thee (Hab. 3:2 AV; Ps. 85:6).
Back to Top

13:1-3

It is of great importance to see that the Word of God was at the heart of the renewed people of God, and it was the supreme rule of their faith and life. It was not just a case of the people individually reading and studying the

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Word of God, but an on-going ministry of the Word. We tend these days (when so many people feel themselves very spiritual and well informed) to devalue the whole business of sitting under the ministry of the Word. There is a particular blessing and benefit in having someone read to us the Word in the context of a service, and the actual reading of the Bible in a service is an essential part of worship. Apart from anything else there is a great impact on any unbelievers present when they become aware of being amongst people who are attending to the Word of God. We need to pray more than we do for the reading and for the preaching of the Word. We have often emphasised Paul's constant plea for his partners in the Gospel to pray for him and for his preaching. Without doubt, it is the prayers of the people that set the preacher free in his handling of the Word, and cause the Word to flow in free and full measure. Read Eph. 6:18-19; Col. 4:2-3; and 2 Thess. 3:1 in relation to prayer for the preaching of the Word. Then read Isa.55:10-11 and Jer. 1:12 in relation to God's sovereign activity in and through His Word, and in watching over it. God's methodology is to save through the proclamation of the Word (1Cor.1:21) and faith comes through the hearing of the Word (Rom.10:17). What expectation there should be every time we gather in church! The possibilities are limitless. Make sure we attend well to the hearing of the Word. As the Catechism teaches: "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man."

Back to Top

13:1-3

We are dealing here with a radical obedience to the Word of God and it seems wise to remind ourselves of the balanced words of the Westminster Confession of Faith. "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men ..... All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear to all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them." We need to be aware that in all matters concerning God and the Gospel we are tied to the Scriptures which are God's revelation of Himself. In our study of Scripture we must not interpret any given passage in a way that directly contradicts what is stated clearly in another passage. It is, of course, the work of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all the truth (John 16:12,-13) but the Spirit will never ignore or contradict Scripture. All Scripture is given by God and is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16). No-one is allowed to impose on Scripture their own private, independent interpretation (2 Pet. 1:19-21). We must compare Scripture with Scripture, and in formulating doctrine we must go as far as Scripture goes and no further. Logic may seem to require us to draw what we think are necessary conclusions, but we must not impose our logic on revelation. What we need to know God has made totally clear.

Back to Top

13:4-9

In the two days we spent studying v.1-3 we did not make mention of the study of Balaam (Num. 22:21-35) but we must do so now for two reasons. First it shows us the sovereign over-ruling of evil powers and evil men who tried to harm and to confuse God's work. That is a great comfort. God is our defence (Ps. 62:2,6). Second, we are told that certain forms and expressions of evil maintain their opposition to God and His work in a totally unchanged way from generation to generation. The Ammonites and Moabites were like that and when the people saw this truth clearly from the Word of God they took action at once and separated from Israel all those of foreign descent who had no right to be there at all. The people of God were determined to live their lives under the discipline of the Word of God. It seems trite to say it but, "God's work done in God's way will not lack God's blessing." But to what extent in organising our church life do we consciously seek God's mind? In our own activities do we in fact deliberately seek to know if we are doing God's will? And, in forming friendships and relationships, do we seek to evaluate our actions in relation to God and in terms of whether or not these relationships will enable and encourage us to be the best we are capable of being for God and for the Gospel? In yesterday's verses, when the people learned from God's Word, their next action was to put it into practice and to adjust their lives accordingly. When we come to today's verses we are shown that not all the congregation of Israel were so clearly committed to God. Indeed it is the story of Eliashib the priest we are told

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about. A man at the heart of the renewed work was the one who introduced what could have been a terrible hindrance and danger. It makes us think of the words in the Gospel, "Lord, is it I?" (Matt. 26:22)
Back to Top

13:4-9

Remember we are dealing with a situation that could rightly be described as spiritual revival in the work of God. It was certainly a significant time in relation to the future progress of the work. But there was "in the church" a hypocrite, a priest who said the right things and in official duties did the right things, so that all thought he was a "holy man", but he was false. Think of the story in Acts 5:1ff and be sober, to the extent that we will take seriously the warning 1 Cor.10:12 and Gal. 6:1-3. Note that the treacherous thing Eliashib did took place when Nehemiah was necessarily absent from Jerusalem. He was under obligation to return to report to Artaxerxes, as 2:6 makes plain. During his fairly long absence, even though there were other leaders of influence, the atmosphere of the congregation of Israel became such that there was a slackening of spiritual discipline and a deliberate stepping aside from God's clearly indicated will. Things, and no doubt people, were ejected from a certain part of God's House and the evil man Tobiah, who had been an opponent of the work all along, was installed in a place of favour, privilege and potential influence. It seems there was no general objection from anyone. Perhaps they just accepted it as an accomplished fact, thinking that if Eliashib was doing this it must be with Nehemiah's approval. Perhaps some thought Tobiah had become a changed man. Perhaps Tobiah used the conventional tag that he was a "born again" man. When Nehemiah returned he was angry and acted at once. How easily the work of God is threatened, even from within. Note very carefully by referring to v.28 that Eliashib and Tobiah were closely in league with Sanballat because of marriages (cf. 6:17-18). We must never appoint people to places of influence in God's work simply because we like them. They must have proved their worth. But remember that Eliashib *seemed* to have done just that!
Back to Top

13:10-14

During the absence of their trusted leader Nehemiah, a further declension of the work and the people had taken place. It must have been public knowledge by now that Tobiah's household goods had been so unceremoniously thrown out and the Temple cleansed. There must have been quite a few uneasy consciences in Jerusalem as people wondered just how much Nehemiah knew of what had been going on. They were forgetting, of course, that God always knows exactly what people are doing, for nothing is hidden from Him and all things are open in His sight (Heb. 4:13). In a situation in which no one had objected to Tobiah's installation we are not surprised to learn that by and large the people had contracted out of their spiritual and practical duties regarding the upkeep of God's House and the maintenance of a spiritual ministry. The Levites, not being provided for, had had to return to secular occupations in order to maintain themselves and their families, and in consequence the spiritual worship and service of the Temple had simply declined and had perhaps stopped. No-one seems to have been unduly bothered, just as few nowadays seem to be bothered first by the disappearance of Prayer Meetings from the life of the church and then the disappearance of Evening Services. The interesting thing is that this spiritual complacency and neglect were being manifested in a work that had been securely established. The city, the walls and the Temple had all been dedicated to God in a thoroughly Biblical way. The surrounding nations could see that this was a holy people and a holy work. But already many were "leaving it to others" to maintain the spiritual integrity of the work. They were "at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1 AV). The Devil was quick to take his opportunity.
Back to Top

13:10-14

How many today will take it for granted that they will have a spiritual church to go to and will simply assume that they will be ministered to richly in God's Word? How many will have done their true share in seeing to it that those set by God to minister in spiritual things have been ministered to, not just in prayer and practical support, but in human fellowship and encouragement? Nehemiah had discovered that the Levites had been left to "go it alone" and as a result their ministry was restricted and the House of God neglected. The Levites were recalled to their duties (11) because the neglect in their support was not a justification for their contracting out. But it is difficult to say whether it was lack of support that drove them to fields and farming or their preoccupation with their fields that led to their neglect of spiritual duties. Ministers need always to be careful

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lest a variety of interests and activities (many of them good in themselves) causes them to neglect their God-given task of ministering to their congregations in respect of God's Word. Both Levites and people were challenged and things were put right. How sad it is when God's House and His work are neglected by being given secondary energy, enthusiasm and service so that God is fitted in when He does not interfere with the rest of life. Turn to Malachi 1:6-9; 3:6-10 and ponder well. Let hearts be searched, lest we also fall into the snare of spiritual complacency, taking for granted our spiritual blessings and assuming that they will necessarily continue. How easy it is to lose our first, fresh love for the Lord and His House, to have interest and energy for all our worldly pursuits, but to "labour up the heavenly hill with weary feet and slow" (T.H.Gill).
Back to Top

13:15-22

It is astonishing and frightening to see just how far the people had backslidden during the spell of Nehemiah's absence. Can a true work of God degenerate so far so quickly? First a godless opponent of the work gets introduced by the priest (4-9); then the whole matter of maintaining the ministry and worship of God's House ran to seed because people were preoccupied with other things (10-14); and now we read of a complete desecration of God's Sabbath which had been blessed and hallowed from the beginning of creation (Gen. 2:3). In the Ten Commandments God had commanded that the Sabbath be kept holy (Ex. 20:8-11). And in Neh. 10:31 the people had renewed their vows in regard to the Sabbath, recognising that it was set apart as a special day for their spiritual blessing and safety. But now, after such a short time, the people of God had slipped into an almost totally secular and materialistic attitude to God's holy day. And inevitably the secular unbelieving men of Tyre saw their opportunity and took full advantage of it. This is exactly what is happening in our own day and further legislation in Parliament may well reduce Sunday to a noisy clamour of a normal business day. It seems reasonable to say that if all those who call themselves Christians had maintained a true reverence and respect for God's Day, and had committed themselves to God's service, the atmosphere of society would have been such that legislation to secularise Sunday would never have been suggested. We need to pray and to live for the observance of the Lord's Day. We need to recognise also the basic dishonesty of secular humanists. If people were not offered extra pay for working on Sundays very few would work. If the extra wages for Sunday work were added to the price of goods only on a Sunday few would want to buy. But the world will not respect God's Law if believers sit lightly to it.
Back to Top

13:15-22

When Nehemiah began to deal with this situation his first action was to remind the people of the lessons of history, pointing out to them that actions bring consequences and that in these consequences we must see the direct and specific action of God in rebuke and judgment. Read Jer.17:19-27 and also Isa. 58:13-14 which we referred to in previous notes. Nehemiah, in v.18b, seems to be saying that if we do not learn the lessons of the past then our situation will be even worse than that of our fathers. It is solemn to read of a God who is angry. It is the anger of the God who has saved His people, preserved them through many dangers and difficulties, blessed them in abundant measure and given them a calling and a destiny that are glorious. We must be impressed with the realism of Nehemiah as a leader, because the action he took and the words he spoke were not likely to make him popular with the people of God or with the worldly traders. But his business was to be right with God and to be found obedient. The safety, health and progress of God's work were far more important than his own popularity or his personal comfort. To begin with, Nehemiah's own servants superintended the strict security measures, and that would have been regarded as a "slap in the face" to the Levites who, of course, as we have seen had not been faithful in their own spiritual duties. The courage of Nehemiah in warning the crowd of godless traders against trying to break the blockade must be noted. There is a time to speak and to speak clearly and, after all, Nehemiah saw that these men were a hindrance and a stumbling-block to God's people. That is serious. We should think of Jesus' warning to all those who in any way say or do things that would tempt Christians to be unfaithful to God (Matt. 18:5-7).
Back to Top

13:23-29

The whole issue of "mixed marriages", believers with unbelievers, had been faced and dealt with by Ezra some thirty years previously (Ezra 9:1-6,10-15) and by Nehemiah prior to his necessary absence from Jerusalem

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(10:28-31). The fact that it was again a problem reveals that there is a constant temptation for God's people to take an "easy" attitude to the whole matter of "consecration" whether in respect of spiritual integrity or moral rectitude. We see from v.28 that the "rot" set in right at the heart of the congregation with the High Priest obviously concurring in the marriage of his son to the daughter of Sanballat. But when leaders begin to make concessions to family, allowing them to step down from standards of faithfulness, it is not surprising that others do the same. In no time at all the congregation of Israel found itself a strange and divided people because of language, culture and religious attitudes. They ceased to be truly recognisable as the people of God and, inevitably, their spiritual vitality and service dried up and died. It is not only romantic relationships and marriages with unbelievers that produce this result. Families we socialise with, sport and recreation clubs we join, music and drama societies we get absorbed in and hobbies that dominate our lives can all suck away from us the fresh vitality and glad commitment that rightly belong to God. Parents can even put their children before God and at times can fill their children's lives with so many interests and activities that there is no room for Jesus. Note in v.23 that it was not people who were slightly irreligious that many of the Jews were marrying but rather rank pagans. Their thoughts of God must have been shallow indeed if they could do this.
Back to Top

13:23-29

We must consider Nehemiah's attitudes and actions because, on the face of it, they seem rather "sub-Christian". Of course, none of us would have much regard for a doctor who prescribed a bottle of cough mixture to deal with a radical lung cancer. We recognise the need for a surgeon's knife in matters of physical health but we seem to be very superficial regarding the diseases of the soul. What we read in v.25 seems very harsh and fierce, but we must remember the Son of God who took a whip to cleanse the Temple (John 2:13-17). Nehemiah took them to task and pronounced God's rebuke and condemnation (cursed). Then, in the beating and plucking of hair, he seems to have carried out what was an accepted public form of rebuke, and which may well have been understood to be part of the covenant curse to which they had consented in 10:29. On an earlier occasion Ezra inflicted a similar thing on himself as an expression of sorrow for the sins of the people (Ezra 9:2-5). Nehemiah then went on to point out that a great and strong man like Solomon had been led away from God by wrong marriages and he protested that he and the people must not go along this road they were following. The testimony of v.28 regarding the immediate removal from fellowship and service of the wilful, sinning High Priest must have had a salutary effect on all the Jews. No concessions were made simply because a man held high office in the work of God. Indeed there was less excuse for him, and therefore the greater condemnation. In the end, Nehemiah did not consider that final judgment lay in his hands. He said, "Remember them, 0 God." Nehemiah was not concerned about any personal insult or the rejection of his leadership. His burden was that God's work had been harmed. That is serious.
Back to Top

13:30-31

The very first word in v.30 refers us back over the story of this whole sad chapter. In verses 11 and 17 we are told that Nehemiah remonstrated with the officials and nobles who should have dealt with these issues when they first emerged. Then in v.25 we are told he rebuked (contended AV), a strong word which seems to suggest that some at least of the offenders were determined to justify or at least to excuse their actions. But, sitting in rightful judgment, perhaps with other judges alongside him, Nehemiah found the parties guilty and ordered the punishment prescribed in God's law in Deut. 25:2-3.The cutting or pulling out of the hair may have been for a public mark of their guilt, and in due time the hair would grow again. Now, while we consider these things we must not fail to note just how painful and costly this whole business of leadership and discipline had been to the man set over God's people and work. In verses 14, 22 and 31 he asked God to remember him. He was not asking for praise or even for justification but rather he was expressing to his God the costly isolation of the position and work given to him. C.H. Spurgeon, that spiritual giant of a former day said, "There is no loneliness like that of a soul that has outstripped its fellows." Such words make us think of the loneliness of our Lord Jesus Christ on many occasions, not least when He strode ahead of His disciples on the way to Jerusalem (Mk.10: 32ff), or in the Upper Room when none of His men and only one woman saw and sensed the agony of His heart as He anticipated the Cross (Mk.14:3-9), or in Gethsemane when He said sadly to His best friends, "Could you not watch with Me one hour?" (Mk. 14:32-42). The thrill of Nehemiah's great work and the

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impressiveness of his spiritual leadership must not cause us to overlook the cost, nor the fact that Nehemiah mentioned the cost only to God.

Back to Top

13:30-31

Nehemiah's work was finished and he committed himself to God in seven simple words at the end. He had already asked that his service be remembered (14, 22), recognising that his acceptance rested in God's love and not in his deserving. He had asked God to remember those who had done wrong to him and his work, perhaps in the same spirit as Paul remembered Alexander in 2 Tim.4:14, but perhaps more in the spirit of Moses who was willing to be blotted out for the sake of God's people, God's work and God's honour (Ex. 32:30-32). Remember me .... "With these words Nehemiah leaves the scene, committing himself and his discharge of duty to the Righteous Judge. His conscientious fidelity had brought him into collision not only with external enemies but with many of his own brethren. His rigorous reformation has been assailed by many moralists and commentators in ever age. But in these words he commits all to God, as it were by anticipation. It may be added that with these words end the annals of Old Testament history." (Ellicot) Perhaps we should all consider just how we will end our work here on earth. It will do us good to read and ponder the words of Paul in 2 Tim. 4:6-8, and to note in the next verses the poignancy of his human feelings and his longing for human company. No one would deny him his commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant, (Matt.25:21-23). Nehemiah likewise will have received his reward. And in due time, like those before him and those after him, having served his generation well, he would fall asleep (Acts 13:36). Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord (Rev. 14:13).

Back to Top

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