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Nehemiah 1

Outline

- I. The problem: disrepair (1-3)
- II. Nehemiah's prayer (4-11)

I. The problem: disrepair (1-3)

Discussion Questions

- What is the month Kislev?
- What does the twentieth year refer to? (Artaxerxes reign. 445 BC.)
- Where is Susa?
- Who came and talked with Nehemiah?
- What news did he bring?
- When had the first group of exiles gone back?
- Where can we learn about that?

Teaching Points

1. Susa - Currently in modern day Iran, Susa become one of the royal cities of the Persian elites after Babylon was conquered. Darius Hystaspis built a palace there, the ruined remains of which can still be seen. The Persian court rotated between Babylon, Susa, and Persepolis. Susa itself is one of the oldest cities in the world and is the background for a number of biblical events including those in the book of Esther.

2. Verse 2 – The Jews were scattered. They lived throughout the Persian Empire. Originally many had been taken captive by the Babylonian kingdom. Eventually the Persians conquered Babylon. In keeping with God's promise to return the Jews to the land He had given them, God worked through the Persian

kings to allow the people to return to the land. It's unclear whether Hanani was a resident of Judah or if he was just visiting. Since he was brothers with Nehemiah and Nehemiah was the king's cup-bearer it would seem likely that they were not born in Jerusalem. The fact that Nehemiah was also the cup-bearer shows us that he was likely a resident of one of the royal cities of the Persian Empire.

Therefore it is likely that this group of men went to Judah specifically to investigate how things were going for the those who had returned almost 90 years before. It is even possible that Nehemiah commissioned them with this task and they were coming back to Babylon to give Nehemiah a report. In any case, it shows that Nehemiah cared a lot about his fellow Jews who lived in Judah.

3. Verse 3 – The report was not good. The remnant of people descended from those who had originally returned as recorded in the book of Ezra were not doing well. They were in “great distress.” The city was in disrepair. They lived with reproach, meaning their position was shameful. Other peoples around them looked down on them. All of Jerusalem's ancient protections were gone. Over 150 years before the wall was destroyed by Babylon. Though the people had returned 90 years before, the wall was still not rebuilt. Even the gates were lying in ruin.

Basically the people were living in the middle of ruins. That would be discouraging to wake up every day and see ruins around you, but more than that it was a continual reminder of their precarious situation as well as all that they had lost through their own nation's sin. We must understand that in the Old Testament God often physically and materially blessed those who were obediently following with, those whom He was pleased with. Since the Jews were living in a ruined city this visible picture of outward decay would seem to indicate that there were much worse spiritual problems as well. We can see some of those problems in Ezra and Haggai when the people intermarried with other nations and focused on paneling their own homes rather than building God's temple. Though there was a remnant and this was something to be encouraged about, generally the outlook for the country was not good.

II. Nehemiah's prayer (4-11)

Discussion Questions

- How did Nehemiah react to the news from Hanani?
- What can we learn about Nehemiah from his reaction?
- Have you ever mourned/fasted/prayed for days? Why or why not? What are some common obstacles we face that may keep us from fasting?
- What can we learn here about Nehemiah's view of God?
- What does he request of God?
- What do we learn about confession?
- What point is Nehemiah making in verses 8-9?
- What does Nehemiah remind the Lord of in verse 10?
- What did a cupbearer do?

Teaching Points

1. Verse 4 – Nehemiah's reaction shows us a lot about him as a person.

He was empathetic - Here we read that he mourned for days. Nehemiah himself didn't face any of the problems the people of Jerusalem faced. He was an important official, one of the upper class. He could

have kept on living and enjoying his life without dwelling on the problems of others. But he didn't. From this we learn that Nehemiah was others-centered. He had a heart for others and hearing about the struggles others were having deeply saddened him and affected his entire outlook.

Application: Do you have a heart for others? When you hear about other people's struggles are you indifferent? Do you perhaps feel empathy with them for a few minutes and then forget it? We should rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.

He was persistent - He wept/mourned/fasted/prayed for days. This was an important issue. He didn't just offer up a 1 minute prayer and then move on. He spent a lot of time before the Lord praying about it and searching for God's will about what he could do. Nehemiah's persistence reminds us of the story Jesus told us about the persistent woman who continued to come to the judge until she got an answer to her appeal.

Application: Have you ever felt so strongly about something that you prayed about it for days a time? Many of us have not. But maybe we should.

He sought God and the wisdom that comes from God - Nehemiah didn't just weep and cry and throw himself a pity party. He turned to the Lord. He fasted. He prayed. He knew the only place real help could come from. He knew where help could come from. Nehemiah didn't rush to the king to get help immediately. Neither did he start issuing orders. Neither did he immediately consult with Hanani and the others. He didn't rely on his own wisdom to begin taking actions. An observer might think that Nehemiah was indecisive and passive, hearing the news and doing nothing for days. But He wasn't doing nothing. He sat down and he prayed. But this was his best recourse.

Application: Prayer should become this natural to us. When faced with challenges and difficulties our first instinct should be to pray. Don't be in a rush to take action. Pray first.

2. Verse 5 – Nehemiah had a high view of God. Look at how Nehemiah describes God in this verse.

- God of heaven.
- Great
- Awesome
- Who preserves the covenant
- Preserves lovingkindness

Nehemiah had a high view of God. From this we can see Nehemiah's humility. He didn't approach God as an equal, as a peer. In his prayer, he recognizes that God is above everything else. He is in control of everything and everything good comes from Him. Our prayers should reflect the same exalted view of God. From this prayer we see Ezra's humility. And humility is the first step of true confession.

3. Verses 6-7 – Starting in these verses we see one of the great prayers of confession in the Bible. We can learn from this prayer many important principles about confession.

The first thing you may observe is that Nehemiah uses many personal pronouns. He uses “I”, “we” and “our.” He says, “We have sinned against you; I and my father's house.” He realized that all of them were guilty, himself included. He is one of the people and identifying himself as linked to the group. The prayer would also not seem nearly as genuine if he kept saying how evil the other Israelites were. We will learn later in the book that many of them committed a lot of sins which Nehemiah did not, but

he still repented because he too was sinful. When one wants to confess to God there should be no blaming or pointing fingers. When people first sinned, Adam pointed to Eve and blamed her and Eve pointed to the snake and blamed it, but in fact they were both culpable for the sin they had done.

No one can make you sin. We are responsible for our own choices. It is not true confession if we seek to blame other people for the wrong that we have done. Your sin is NOT your parents fault (as much as psychologists try to tell you that it is.) It is not your bosses' fault, your wife's fault, or your friend's fault. Each one of us has a choice. Other people may influence us, but the final choice is our own. True confession takes personal responsibility and doesn't blame others.

4. Nehemiah realized that all sin is against God. He admits “We have acted very corruptly against You.” Every sin is a sin against God. Peter said that Ananias and Saphira's lie was against the Holy Spirit. Every sin we commit is an instance of disobeying God's law. Disobeying God is sinning against God. David also admitted that his sin with Bathsheba was a sin against God alone, showing that our sins are primarily against God. Since our sins are against God confession is not complete until we ask God to forgive us.

5. True confession doesn't minimize the sin. Notice that Nehemiah doesn't say, “We have sinned against you a little.” He says, we have acted **very** corruptly. Their sin problem was not a little problem. It was a big problem. I often ask people when sharing the gospel with them if they have sin. Most of them admit that they have sin. I then ask, “Is your sin serious.” Most answer, “No.” That in a nutshell is our problem. We think that our sin is not serious. But in fact, it is. Don't minimize it.

6. True confession includes the offense. Nehemiah says “and have not kept the commandments...which You commanded Your servant Moses.” The problem wasn't some vague mistake. It wasn't vague at all. The problem was that they had as a nation specifically disobeyed many of the commands God had given to Moses. A real apology is not a vague “Sorry.” It is not insincere like, “Sorry if I offended you.” A real apology is clear. A real apology must include what you are apologizing for. Let's make a habit to confess to others when we wrong them and when we do make it clear what you are apologizing for.

Activity: Go around the table and ask each person to give an example of a real or insincere apology. If time permits, you may also ask each person to give an example of an insincere apology.

7. Verse 8 – In verse 8 we see Nehemiah admit that the problems they faced as a nation were a direct result of God's discipline for their sin. He quotes Moses saying, “If you are unfaithful I will scatter you.” He is admitting that the people were unfaithful and that is why they were scattered. This doesn't mean that all trials are the result of sin. As we learn in the story of the blind man in John 9, not every affliction is the result of sin. There are many possible reasons for them. But in the case with Israel, God had already told them that He was disciplining them because of their sin.

But many times (not always) people's difficulties are the result of poor life choices. Marriages fail because of sin (of one or other or both sides). A son or daughter won't speak to his parent many times because of the mistakes of that parent. A student fails an exam and misses a chance to enter college because he didn't study hard. A family loses their home and everything they own because of poor financial decisions and getting into too much debt. A person goes to jail because of a lapse of judgment in which he drank too much, drove, and ran over someone. The list goes on and on. Can you think of any examples where your own sin/mistakes caused you a trial or hardship? Many times in these types

of situations people would grow bitter. They would complain, get depressed, grow angry at other people, or even lash out at God. This is the wrong response. Instead of blaming others for our problems, we should realize that our own sin has brought us to this low, confess and seek to make right what we have done wrong. True confession realizes that sin comes with consequences.

8. True confession seeks and claims God's forgiveness. The goal of confession is not a pity party. We are not to roll around on the ground all the time saying, "Woe is me." We see that Nehemiah quotes God's promise to bring them back to the land if they return to Him and keep His commandments (in other words, if they confess/repent.) We have a merciful God. He promises to forgive us if we truly repent. Nehemiah knew this and that is what drove him to pray this prayer. It is pointless to pray and confess if we do not worship a God who is loving and forgiving. See 1 John 1:9. The good news for us is that if we are sincere in our repentance God will forgive us.

9. Verse 10 – In this verse we see Nehemiah remind God of the relationship He has with His people. These are His people. He chose them. He redeemed them. He has performed miracles for them. Don't forget them!

10. Verse 11 – Nehemiah asks God to pay attention and listen to his prayer. He then asks God to make him successful and grant him compassion before "this man." It would seem that during his prayer God was working in Nehemiah's heart, beginning to show him what he must do. While praying and confession was a good first step, this was not the end of God's plan for Nehemiah. It wasn't enough for him to recognize the problem. It wasn't even enough to pray about the problem. Next God required action. True confession will cause us to ask the question, "what next?"

A righteous person falls seven times and rises again. Confession restores our relationship to God and readies us to serve Him again. Nehemiah saw the problem and saw that God wanted to use him as part of the solution to the problem. Prayer is absolutely necessary. It is one kind of working for God. But our work for God must not stop there. Believers are to get down on their knees to approach God and then get up from their knees to go out into the world to serve Him. We pray for the lost. Then we must preach to the lost. We pray for our test. Then we must study for our test. We pray for wisdom. Then we must read His word and ask our brothers and sisters. We pray for our daily needs. Then we must find a job and work diligently at it. Nehemiah understands this principle. He knew what he had to do. He had to face the king and get his help for the next step. That was no easy task. He needed God's strength. He needed boldness. We will see in the next chapter how God answers his prayer.

Nehemiah 2

Outline

- III. Nehemiah talks with Artaxerxes (1-8)
- IV. Nehemiah inspects the walls (9-16)
- V. Nehemiah proposes rebuilding the wall (17-20)

I. Nehemiah talks with Artaxerxes (1-8)

Discussion Questions

- How long had it been since Nehemiah heard about the state of Jerusalem?
- What can we learn about Nehemiah's job in this passage?
- What caused the king to ask Nehemiah why he was sad?
- Why was Nehemiah very afraid?
- What can you learn about how to deal with fear from Nehemiah?
- How did he deal with his fear?
- How did Nehemiah respond when the king asked him what he requested?
- What does his response show about his preparation/planning for this issue?
- What do we learn from him about prayer?
- What do we learn from him about planning and preparedness? How does prayer work together with these things?
- What specific requests did Nehemiah make of the king? What does this show us about him? Are there any lessons we can learn from this?
- How did the king respond to Nehemiah? Why? What principles can we learn from this?

Cross-references

Esther 4:11 - "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

Esther 5:1-2 – On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

Verses on Planning

Luke 14:28-33 – In this passage Jesus talks about the importance of considering the consequences of making an important decision before making it.

Proverbs 21:5 – The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.

Proverbs 16:3 – Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.

Proverbs 6:6-8 – Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!
It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

James 4:13-15 – Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

Teaching Points

1. The month Nisan – How much time had passed?
2. I had not been sad in his presence – It seems it was against court traditions for officials or nobles to be sad in the presence of the king. The officials' job was to serve the king and make him happy. The king seemingly didn't want to be reminded of the troubles of his people. They were to do their jobs well and leave their problems outside the court. After all, their problems would be considered of far less importance than the very smallest of the king's own problems. In the end, this shows the perspective that the king's happiness and well-being was of primary concern. The people existed to serve the king and not the other way around.
3. The king noticed Nehemiah's sadness – He had kept it to himself for quite some time, but on this day (whether intentionally or not) his sadness was visible enough that the king noticed and commented on it.
4. Nehemiah was very much afraid – Notice his response. He wasn't excited about the opportunity to share with the king or at least that wasn't his primary emotion. He was scared of what the king would do to him for breaking this tradition. Artaxerxes could have certainly fired him. But he could do a lot worse. He could have him executed. Kings at that time didn't require much of a reason to have people killed.

But notice in the following verses how Nehemiah responded. He was scared, but he didn't let that fear control him. He didn't freeze. He didn't panic. He didn't turn around and run out of the court. Nehemiah didn't apologize and beg for forgiveness or mercy. While he was afraid, he also knew that there was an opportunity here. It was the opportunity he had been praying for and he seized it while he could so that it would not go to waste. In fact, we will see that he was very bold.

Application: Fear is a natural reaction sometimes. But God doesn't want us to allow our fear to control us. We must move past our fear to do what God wants us to do. What are some things you may be afraid or nervous about that you may need to do anyway?

- Sharing the gospel.
- Changing jobs.
- Making sacrifices for God's kingdom.
- Public preaching, leading a Bible study, discipling others
- Talking to your parents about the Lord
- Confronting someone in sin
- Speaking up against peer pressure or the evils in society
- Getting married?
- How can you be bold in these situations?

5. Nehemiah's first response to the king – Nehemiah first responds politely, “Let the king live forever.” He lets the king know that even though he is sad it doesn't mean he is a bad subject. He is not committing rebellion. But he does have a legitimate concern. After telling the king clearly the reasons for his sadness, he then poses the king a question, “Why should my face not be sad?” In other words he says, “I have a good reason for being sad.”

6. The king asked him for his request – In the last chapter we saw that Nehemiah was praying for this issue. He was also praying that God would grant him compassion in the sight of the king. Now we see that his prayers were being answered. Nehemiah saw the answer and responded appropriately to it. This is simple, but an important lesson for us.

Application: When you pray for something, watch carefully for the answer! We don't want to pray for something and then miss it when the answer is right in front of us!

7. Nehemiah's spontaneous prayer – Nehemiah had already prayed about this issue. But now in the heat of the moment, he still didn't rely on his own wisdom. He tossed up one more heartfelt prayer to God. It was probably a very quick, silent prayer. And yet that prayer had power. It had power because it matched Nehemiah's life of prayer. Our life should be filled both with dedicated times of private prayer, and also with those short prayers of help in times of need. If you only ask God for help in times of need and never prayed to Him before, those prayers may lack the same power. God wants to see us rely on Him through prayer consistently, making it a habit rather than only turning to Him in times of intense need.

Application: We can learn from Nehemiah that we should rely on God all the time. No situation is too urgent to offer up a quick prayer of help. Our lives should, like his, be saturated with prayer. Our natural response when facing decisions, trials, temptations, or emergencies should be to say, “God help me!”

8. Nehemiah's request to the king – Here we see Nehemiah frankly asks for the king's permission to himself lead an expedition to repair the wall! This is a huge request! Generally kings may be skeptical of walled cities in other nationalities that were subjugated to them. If Jerusalem was walled, logic says the people in it may decide to rebel again. But Nehemiah wasn't afraid to make big requests. Why not?

We know he had already prayed about it. And I believe God had already led him to make this plan. He knew what he was going to ask before the king even asked him. William Carey said, “Attempt great things for God; Ask great things of God.” This should be our attitude as well.

Don't ask the question, “What can I do?” Instead ask the question, “What needs to be done?” That is the question Nehemiah asked. After he realized what needed to be done, he was bold enough to go for it. This request was also quite abnormal. There was apparently no benefit for the king. Instead he lost a trusted official for a long time. God was obviously working.

9. How long will your journey be? - Nehemiah was able to quickly give a clear answer. This clues us that he had prepared well. He had researched the situation. He knew about how long it would take to get there, how long it would take to build the wall, and how long it would take to go back. Trusting in God is not an excuse for a lack of preparation. Instead it is a reason to prepare all the more because we believe that God will give us a chance to put those plans into action.

10. Nehemiah's additional requests – Nehemiah then asks for letters of protection that he can give to all the regional rulers of the lands he will pass through. That is bold. But he doesn't stop there. He then asks for another letter, this one to be given to Asaph to ask for materials to use in the rebuilding of the wall.

Let's pause and think about this for a moment. How did he even know the name of Asaph? It would seem unlikely he would haul the materials for the wall the entire 5 month journey from Susa. That

would be that Asaph was likely the keeper of a forest much closer to Jerusalem. It would also seem unlikely that Nehemiah and the other officials would automatically know the names of all the people in the huge Persian government. That would mean that Nehemiah had already researched this issue ahead of time. He had gotten all the info he would need to communicate to the king when the opportunity came up so that he would know exactly what to say. Imagine what the result would have been if the king asked him what he wanted and Nehemiah said, "I don't know. I haven't really thought about it yet. Let me get back to you."

The result would not have been good. By having a detailed plan ready to go, Nehemiah demonstrated to the king he was competent to be entrusted with this task. He gave confident answers which in turn made the king confident that he knew what he was doing. Also, this request for materials was the largest yet. Not only did Nehemiah ask the king for permission to rebuild the wall, he asked him to finance it. And the king said, "Sure!" Wow! The only conclusion he could make is that "the good hand of my God was with me." Nehemiah had prepared the best he could, but he gave all the credit to God for his success.

Application: Like Nehemiah, we must also prepare ahead for the tasks God has in store for us. We must be diligent. We can and should make plans. When we do, we must pray to God for wisdom. We must not leave God out of the plans. We shouldn't make plans on our own and then ask God to bless those. God should be part of the process from beginning to end. A lazy person says, "I will trust in God. I don't need to make plans. I don't need to prepare." A prideful person says, "I will make an execute my plans on my own. I don't need God." We don't want to be prideful or lazy. Finally, we should give the glory to God for the results and not take credit for ourselves.

II. Nehemiah inspects the walls (9-16)

Discussion Questions

- What do we learn in verse 10 about the cause for Nehemiah's visit?
- What reaction we see in verse 10?
- Why may Nehemiah have gone to survey the wall at night and not tell anyone?
- What else can we learn from his character from his survey of the wall?

Cross-references

Proverbs 29:18 – Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint; but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom's instruction.

Isaiah 41:10 - So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Fear not. I am with you. I will uphold you.

Ezra 1:5 - Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

Ezra 7:6 – This Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.

Proverbs 24:10 – If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength!

Joshua 1:9 – Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

1 Peter 4:12-13 – Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Teaching Points

1. Nehemiah goes on the journey. The king had sent officers of the army with him to keep him safe on the way, another example that God had made the king favorably disposed to him.

2. Verse 10 – In this verse we see the beginnings of what will turn out to be very pesky opposition. These were both likely officials. Note that in verse 9 Nehemiah was showing the governors the letters from the king. He hadn't told others about his purpose yet. Both Sanballat and Tobiah heard about his plan in verse 9, meaning that they were officials with some high ranking, perhaps even regional governors.

3. Verses 11-16 – Nehemiah spends the first three days planning and surveying. He wanted to know exactly what the project in front of him would require. He doesn't make rash decisions. A leader should understand all the potential difficulties and obstacles in front of him. He wouldn't want to propose his plan only to be surprised when someone pointed out a huge problem he knew nothing about.

Application: Don't be hasty. Don't make rash decisions. And don't act without thinking and researching. Before making important decisions spend the necessary time required to gather all of the relevant information you will need.

4. Nehemiah went secretly at night – He wasn't ready to tell others his plan yet so he did his surveying at night. As a leader, he knew it was important to make a clear and complete proposal. That required not saying anything until he was ready to say everything.

III. Nehemiah proposes rebuilding the wall (17-20)

Discussion Questions

- How did Nehemiah communicate with the people? What was his plan?
- How long had it been since they had first returned to Jerusalem? Why hadn't the wall been rebuilt before? Why was Nehemiah successful in convincing the people this time? What do we learn from him about leadership?
- How can you learn from this to be a better leader?
- What opposition did they face?
- How did Nehemiah respond to the opposition? How should we respond to opposition?

Cross-references

John 14:1 – “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.

Psalm 37:5 – Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this.

Teaching Points

1. Verses 17-18 – Nehemiah proposes rebuilding the wall. It is likely that these verses are a summary of what he said and not a complete record. We know that Nehemiah was a detail oriented person. We also see that in verse 18 he tells them about the king's words, but he doesn't record that conversation here. The main point of his conversation was three-fold.

Firstly, the what. He proposed rebuilding the wall together. Second, the why. Jerusalem was in a bad situation. Thirdly, the who. God. God was with them and this was all the reason they needed to just do it. He said, "Let us arise and build." I love the word "arise." They had to stop sitting down. They had to stop being complacent. They had to take action. They had to be unified. Every work for God is like this.

Application: We may not have a wall to build, but we all have something to build for God. What does He want you to build? Are you building it? Are you building your kingdom or God's kingdom? Building for God takes an effort. It is not easy. It is a lot easier to sit and do nothing (people sit about one third of their lives.) The lesson for you today might be very simple. God may want you to arise and build for Him! Let's together put our hands to the good work!

Nehemiah 3

Outline

I. The people rise up and work (3:1-32)

Discussion Questions

- Why does Nehemiah list out so specifically each person's name and where they were working?
- What can we learn from this?
- What observations do you have about this chapter?
- What kinds of people were working on this wall?
- Can we learn any lessons from them about unity? Teamwork? Working even though it wasn't their talent?
- Why did Nehemiah arrange it for each person to work in front of their own house? How might this affect the quality of their work?

On Work:

Proverbs 16:3 – Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.

Proverbs 18:19 – A brother wronged is more unyielding than a fortified city; disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel.

Genesis 2:15 – The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

2 Thessalonians 3:10 – For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”

1 Thessalonians 4:11 – And to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you.

1 Corinthians 15:10 – But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

On Teamwork:

1 Corinthians 12:20-25 – In this famous passage Paul shows that one body has many parts. Many different members work toward the same goal.

1 Peter 4:10 – Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.

1 Corinthians 1:10 – I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

Teaching Points

1. Verse 2 – Eliashib, the high priest arose, together with his brothers and began the work. Notice that even the high priest joined the task. He is the first one mentioned and I think that is significant. It shows that Nehemiah though his example was important. Imagine how difficult it would be for Nehemiah to rally the people to build the wall if the high priest did not support it. The high priest set a good example. He also did not consider that he was too important to help or too high and mighty to get his hand’s dirty. Rather than sending servants as proxies, he dug in himself. This was hard work. It's not glamorous. Eliashib was willing to dirty his hands because it needed to be done.

Application: Neither should we consider a God given job is beneath us. Whether the job is washing dishes, taking out the trash, or changing a diaper, we should humbly do our part with a good attitude.

2. Verse 5 – Not everyone supported the work. Some nobles of the Tekoites did not support it. Note that that didn't stop the Tekoites themselves from building it. They did the task because it was the right thing to do. God is our final authority and if He wants us to do something, we should do it no matter if others support us or not.

3. Verse 8 – Notice in this verse that both goldsmiths and perfumers worked on the wall. Perhaps goldsmiths had some talent in the area of building, but perfumers? Let's face it. Building a wall was probably not their strength or gifting. Perfumers is something like the modern day health and beauty sector. They designed sweet smelling perfumes for weddings, rich people, or religious ceremonies. It is likely their hands were soft and they were used to gentle work. But here they are way outside of their comfort zone building a wall.

Application: We should not refuse to do work for the Lord with the excuse that “It is not my gifting.” There are certain things that God wants every believer to do. Sharing the gospel, discipling other believers, worshiping God, praying, memorizing Scripture, serving in the church, etc. are a few examples of things every believer should do. You may not be as good at it as others, but you still need to do it. God may want you to do something way outside of your comfort zone, but you still need to do it.

4. Verse 12 – Here we see even some women got involved in building the wall. Everyone has a task and everyone can help.

5. Verse 20 – Do you notice anything special about Baruch? Whereas Nehemiah lists each person and says that they repaired their section of the wall, he says that Baruch “zealously” repaired his assigned section. Why did Nehemiah insert this word here? Clearly Baruch's diligence made an impression upon him. Everyone was working, but Baruch stood out.

Application: He is an example we can aspire to. Whatever task God gives to us, we should do it zealously. It's hard to imagine zealously repairing a broken down wall, but Baruch did it. He likely had a smile on his face. Maybe he whistled or sung. He likely took fewer breaks than others and worked harder than average. It's a good goal to be one of the workers. It's an even better goal to be an exceptional worker for God who is zealous for his task.

If a book was written about your work for the Lord, what would it say? Would it say you rested all the time? Would it say you cared more for your comfort and convenience than for finishing the job? Would it say you were a worker who did just enough to pass by? Would it say you were a good worker? Or would it say you zealously worked for the Lord? Which kind do you want to be? Then arise up and build for God!

6. Verse 23 – Many people were assigned the area right in front of their house to build. Why? It was smart of Nehemiah to divide up the labor like this for several reasons.

- It saves travel time.
- They may take pride in the work and want the wall next to their house to look good. It wouldn't be good for their property value if the wall next to their house was the worst one.
- They would also want their families to be safe so wouldn't want the wall next to their house to be the weak link where attacks may come.

7. Nehemiah was organized – This chapter is not the most exciting chapter in the Bible. Yet it shows us an important point. The Bible is based on the lives of real people, is written about real places and real events. From this chapter we can see that Nehemiah was a very organized leader. He took the work seriously. He didn't just send people out randomly to build the wall. He didn't say, “there is a stack of stones, everybody get to work.” From this chapter we see again that he had a plan. His plan was very detailed. The people mentioned in this chapter were likely the leaders of their sector and may have had more helpers. Each person was responsible to make sure their sector was done and done well. Nehemiah wisely delegated that authority so he didn't have to personally oversee every single detail, which was in fact impossible.

8. It is a good example of teamwork – Here was a group of people including men and women, spiritual leaders and laymen, white collar and blue collar workers, talented and unskilled workers, old and young, all working together. Working together didn't mean they were each doing exactly the same

thing. Within the task of building the wall, there would be many different tasks. Some tasks would include carrying stones, cooking, cutting wood or stones, making mortar, architectural design, gate-builders, people who watched over the beasts of burden, etc.

Being a team doesn't mean every person does the same thing at the same place and time. It means that each member of the team works together for a common goal. They support and encourage each other.

Application: Are you on a team? What is your role on the team? Are you doing it? In fact, we are all on the team. The church today is similar in some ways to those building the wall at that time. There are certain things all of us do (like sharing the gospel). At the same time each of us has a gifting from the Spirit to better accomplish the specific things that God wants us to do. We are working for the same common goal. We may face opposition from within and without. But we must not give up. Instead we must zealously do the work God has prepared for us.

9. Work is good – I noticed on John Piper's website (desiringgod.org) he says, “I don't want to be a comfort-driven, pleasure seeking, entertainment-addicted Christian.”

It seems many people in the world today are allergic to work. Just a little exertion will tire them out. They think they need lots of sleep and lots of rest. A cold will sideline them for weeks. We should not be like this. Work is good. God's original plan included work for Adam and Eve. Both physical work and spiritual labors for God are good and important. God even designed our consciences to understand this. Imagine you rest and take it easy for the whole week and someone asks you what you did that week. Will you excitedly and pridefully say, “I rested this week!” Or will you be kind of embarrassed that you didn't do anything?

You see, when we accomplish things we feel a great sense of accomplishment. We know that we have not wasted our time away. Our life here on earth is short. Let's use our time wisely. Let's rise up and build for God! One day when you face God and give a report of your time on earth hopefully you will have a lot more to say than “I got plenty of rest!” Actually heaven is described as a place of rest. You will have all of eternity to rest. You can rest later. My point is not that you can't rest now. No one has the energy to work all the time. The question is not do you ever rest, it is if you have the right balance. What work do you think God wants you to do this week?

Nehemiah 4

Outline

- I. The opposition to rebuilding (1-4)
- II. The opposition intensifies (5-23)

- I. Opposition to the rebuilding (1-4)

Discussion Questions

- What do you think was the purpose of Sanballat's and Tobiah's “speech” to their buddies in verses 3-4?
- How does Nehemiah respond when he hears about it?
- What is his prayer? What do you think of his prayer?
- Why could they make such quick progress on the wall (verse 6)?

Teaching Points

1. Opposition continued – In verses 1-3 we see that the opposition the builders faced didn't crumble away. Instead it intensified. Many times this type of opposition is not short term. Being victorious once doesn't guarantee you won't face it again. It also doesn't guarantee you will be victorious the next time. God wanted them to rebuild the wall, but he did not remove the opposition. Why?

2. Sanballat was angry – Believers doing right things serving the Lord sometimes stirs up an unnatural hatred in the unbelievers around us. There may not be a logical reason for this hatred. We have to understand that we are in a spiritual war (see Ephesians 6). Understanding that Satan uses people as pawns in his war against all things good and holy will help us to more clearly comprehend the source of this anger.

I have had many friends who have faced angry parents or bosses because of their decision to serve the Lord. One's father threatened to get a gang together and break his leg and then ransack his house if he didn't deny the faith. I met this father and he was so angry you could visibly see it on his face. It looked like the veins in his head were going to burst. His whole body was visibly shaking. Another's father yelled him almost constantly each day across a week-long holiday. Satan is angry when we choose God. People under his dominion (he is called the god of this world) may be angry as well. Don't be surprised and don't let it discourage you.

3. Sanballat and Tobiah's speech – In chapter 2 we see Nehemiah's speech which was meant to inspire the people to work. Here we see the counterpart to that speech. Only this speech is not given to inspire people to work. It is given to inspire people to destroy (4:7-8). See John 10:10. The thrust of their mocking was “You can't do it.” This is a lie from Satan. If God wants us to do something, He will give us the strength and resources to accomplish it.

II. The opposition intensifies (5-23)

Discussion Questions

- What groups of people were opposing the rebuilding project?
- What did they decide to do?
- How did Nehemiah hear about this threat?
- How did Nehemiah respond to this new threat?
- Besides praying, what else did he do?
- Where did this saying come from in verse 10? Why does Nehemiah reference it here?
- How did Nehemiah encourage the people?
- What changes did Nehemiah make to prevent future attacks?
- What lessons can we learn from Nehemiah? About leadership? About planning? About responding to opposition?
- When we work for the Lord, what kind of adversity or opposition may we face?

- How can we persevere and not give up?

Teaching Points

1. Nehemiah prays against his enemies – What do you think of his prayer? First we see that Nehemiah turned to the right place with his concerns. He didn't take revenge. He didn't return insults. He simply prayed. He prayed to ask for God's help. His prayer reminds us of the principle in Romans 12:19, which could be stated “I won't take revenge, but God please avenge us against them!” In the Old Testament the concept of grace was not as prevalent as in the New Testament. Justice was emphasized more. Basically this is a prayer for justice rather than a prayer for mercy or grace.

Should we pray like this? I would answer, “no” because we have been given a specific command by Jesus to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). Nehemiah had not been given this command since it is a New Testament command. The good aspect of Nehemiah's prayer is that he puts the judgment of his enemies in God's hands. He is not willing to take action against Sanballat and his gang, but asks God to intervene on their behalf.

Application: When we are suffering injustice (perhaps from a boss, school, or government) we should turn to the Lord and ask Him to intervene on our behalf. It is right to ask God to intervene for us to give us justice (see: the persevering widow in Luke 18).

2. Verse 6 – Nehemiah didn't just pray. He was not “so heavenly minded that he was no earthly good.” After praying, then they started working. The text says that they “had a mind to work.” In chapter 3 we learned that working, if doing it with the right motivation for the Lord, is a good thing. If something is worth doing, it is worth doing well. See Colossians 3:23-24. When God gives us a task to do, we should do it to the best of our ability. We should obey joyfully, quickly, and completely. They were able to make rapid progress on the wall because they were unified and worked hard. When we join hands together to zealously serve the Lord, He could also use us to accomplish great things. Many hands make light work.

3. Verses 7-8 – We see that the adversity the Jews faced intensified. Sanballat and Tobiah went from irritated talking and mocking to angry threats and a conspiracy to attack the city. Once the walls were finished it would be too late to mount a successful attack against the city without a much stronger force than they had. Also it is likely that they were not expecting a lot of opposition. They likely thought that the Jews' fortitude would melt away as soon as they faced some actual loss. Sanballat and his friends are like the school bully who expects people to cower and run away and give him whatever he wants just because he scowls at them.

Principle: Just because you successfully stand up to temptation or adversity the first time, doesn't mean that is the end of it. In the Bible Satan described as an adversary and he is sometimes very persistent.

4. Verse 9 – Here we see Nehemiah and the people's response to this new threat. They pray and they prepare. They were vigilant and alert. They followed the command from Peter in 1 Peter 5:8 to be alert against the attacks of the devil more than 500 years before it was even written.

5. Fear and discouragement – Were the threats of Sanballat and his friends successful? Initially the threats were partially successful. In verse 10 we see that people began to be disheartened. They started muttering. Hope began to fade. Before the people were optimistic. They believed that by working

together and relying on the Lord they could finish the task. But now their eyes were starting to turn away from God and instead focus on the sheer size of the task before them. They focused on their own weakness and the sorry state of the walls. Doubt began to creep in. Once the doubt began to creep in, the enemy stepped up their verbal attacks even more, threatening surprise attacks and promising to kill the workers.

The workers were not expert wall builders. The project was immense. And the opposition was intense. Jews who lived near Sanballat and his buddies starting coming in with reports. They didn't bring one or two or three reports about the possible attack, but ten! How could a worker keep building the wall when several times a day his neighbors rushed into the city warning that the enemy was going to come and attack and kill them all? Those kinds of threats made it extremely difficult to focus on the job in front of them. God wants us to have faith. But Satan wants us to doubt. Can you think of any other examples in the Bible where Satan tempted people to doubt God? (See Exodus 32:1 where the people doubted if Moses would come down again from the mountain.)

6. Nehemiah addresses the people (verse 14) – The people were afraid. This is a normal reaction. Nehemiah himself was afraid back in chapter 1 when the king asked why he was sad. But he didn't allow the fear to control him. Here he doesn't want fear to control the people's response either. He reminds them that God is great and awesome. God will be with them. At the same time they have to prepare themselves to fight. Remembering their family can motivate them to get ready to fight and to fight bravely.

Application: When we face adversity, we may be afraid. But do not allow fear to control you. Remember that God is great and awesome. He is with you. Remember too that God gives us spiritual armor (see Ephesians 6). He gives us armor because He intends to use it. There is no guarantee that believers will not face adversity or persecution. In fact, just the opposite. See 2 Timothy 3:12. We will face persecution if we are living godly lives. How can you be ready when that persecution comes?

7. Nehemiah's plan – Nehemiah prayed. Nehemiah addressed the people. Nehemiah knew God was with them. At the same time, Nehemiah prepared the people to defend themselves. Trusting in God is not an excuse for laziness.

Let us look at Nehemiah's defense plan:

- He focused defense near the weakest parts of the wall (13)
- Half of the people stood guard while the other half worked (16)
- Those who worked carried their weapon at the same time (17-18)
- He assigned some people as lookouts with trumpets to rally support to any place which might be attacked (19-20)
- He made the people stay in the city at night instead of returning back to their homes outside the wall (22)
- He had all the people be on alert at all times with their weapons always ready (23)

Application: Resist the devil and he will flee from you – See verse 15. See James 4:7. When their enemies saw all the measures taken against them they gave up their plan of attack and the Jews were able to focus again on building the wall.

Satan wants to stop us from doing God's work. What obstacles are you facing against serving God? Are you facing obstacles at work? At home? In your family? In your ministry? Will you allow Satan to stop

you from doing the work God has prepared for you?

On Adversity:

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 – We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

1 Peter 5:10 – And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

Proverbs 24:10 – If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength!

Psalms 34:19 – The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.

On Persecution:

2 Timothy 3:12 – In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

John 15:18 – If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

1 Peter 3:14-17 – But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Nehemiah 5

Outline

- I. The problem: Jews mistreating their brethren (1-5)
- II. Nehemiah rebukes the people (6-11)
- III. The people listen to Nehemiah (12-13)
- IV. Nehemiah sacrifices for the people (14-19)

- I. The problem: Jews mistreating their brethren (1-5)

Discussion Questions

- What problem does Nehemiah hear about in these verses?
- Who raises the problem?
- What caused the people to get into this difficult financial situation?
- How did they try to stay alive?

- What did their richer brethren do for or to them?
- Was this lawful or not?
- What do you think the richer Jews should have done in this situation? Why?

Teaching Points

1. Many people struggled to survive – Another problem rose up which threatened to end the rebuilding project. Disunity is one of the quickest ways to stop people from working together toward a common goal. In the last chapters we have seen that adversity from external forces threatened to stop the work. Now we see that adversity may also arise from the inside. Satan does not need to raise up enemies against God's work if he can turn God's people against each other.

Many of the poor families were complaining against the rich. They were struggling to survive. Instead of their richer brethren helping them, the richer Jews were taking advantage of them. The poor Jews needed to eat. So the rich Jews offered to help them, but at a price. The price was a heavy one. The rich Jews forced their poorer brethren to mortgage their own property in order to get money to eat. That in itself wasn't the worst of it. When property wasn't enough collateral they took their Jewish brother's children as slaves. In addition, they charged such heavy interest that the poorer class had no hope to get out from under this burden of debt. The king's tax seems to be the catalyst for all of this. It seems that the royal tax was very high and likely caused the people to get into debt at the beginning. Rather than help them get out of debt, the rich added to their burdens. It was a classic case of “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” What was the matter with this? What should the richer class have done? See Deuteronomy 23:19, “Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest.”

2. We must have a correct viewpoint about money – Why does God give us money (and other resources?) What are we to do with the money that we have? These rich Jews approached this issue selfishly. It seems they thought “This is my money. I will use it to make more money for me.” We should not think of our money like this. Instead we must realize that we are stewards. Everything we have belongs to God. He entrusts us with resources like money so that we can use it for Him and others around us. We should not foolishly throw money away. Neither should we be stingy and selfishly hold on to it and use it for ourselves. See Proverbs 3:27,.. “Do not withhold good... when it is in your power to help them.” See also Acts 20:35 and Proverbs 19:17.

II. Nehemiah rebukes the people (6-11)

Discussion Questions

- How did Nehemiah feel when he heard about this? Why was he so upset?
- What did he do first? What he do next?
- What lessons can we learn from Nehemiah here on leadership?
- What lessons can we learn from Nehemiah on dealing with sin?
- What was Nehemiah's solution to the problem? What did this solution require of the richer Jews? Do you think it was easy or difficult for them? Why?

Teaching Points

1. A good leader is invested emotionally in his people – Here is a case of righteous anger. Nehemiah was a leader of the people. He was trying to inspire them to work together on an important, but difficult task. They were facing adversity from their enemies. And now he heard this news about Jews exploiting other Jews. He was not happy. Notice that a good leader cannot and does not ignore sin

committed by the people he is supervising. A good leader is active, not passive. A good leader cares spiritually and emotionally for his people, showing empathy and concern for those he cares for.

2. A good leader takes action – Nehemiah's strong emotional response forced him to take action to address this issue. Good leaders don't just stand by and let sin and disunity rip apart God's people. Instead he must take action to deal with the sin.

3. A good leader is not afraid to stand up against sin – Here Nehemiah publicly and directly speaks out against the culprits. He puts the blame squarely on the backs of the richer class. Why? They were the ones who were directly disobeying God's command in the book of Deuteronomy. He doesn't mince words or candy coat it. Instead he brings the problem out and makes it clear who is responsible and exactly what the wrong they have done is.

4. A good leader challenges his people to do better (8) – The Jews had apparently banded together to try to repurchase as many Jewish slaves from the Gentiles as they could. Great! It was an excellent and honorable plan. But now they are regressing and becoming like the nations around them by valuing wealth and luxury over their brethren. Nehemiah knew they had done better in the past. He also knew they could do better in the future. Nehemiah did not adopt a pessimistic and negative attitude about the people. He did not assume the worst, but he believed the best, optimistically believing they could do better and so challenged them to do so.

Illustration: I was teaching a play class at a training center. I and my assistant teacher kept asking one father to encourage his kid to take part in the activities. The child was very able to do it and quite intelligent. But the father kept saying, “He can't do it. He is too little. He doesn't know how.” Instead of believing in his kid and encouraging him to reach his full potential, he was pessimistic. Because he didn't believe in and help his boy to accomplish the tasks, his son didn't learn or improve.

5. A good leader wants his people to be a good testimony – Nehemiah realized that their actions would be scrutinized by others. By treating each other poorly the unbelievers around them would have reason to criticize and slander them. Why would anyone want to believe in the God of the Jews if they saw the Jews exploiting and abusing each other? That would not attract people to God. It would repel them. See John 13:34-35. We have all heard of the people who say they don't want to go to church because of how people treat each other there. What a terrible testimony this is! Our actions or attitudes should never repel people from God.

6. A good leader challenges his people to repent – Notice Nehemiah's conclusion. He did rebuke them, but he didn't leave them with a rebuke. See 1 Timothy 3:16. He instead offered them a path to restoration. He offered them a solution. There is a great difference between a father who is angry at his child for hitting someone and says, “What is the matter with you? You are a wicked and rude boy.” than the father who says, “You should not hit. Go and ask forgiveness. Next time you can share your toys instead of hitting someone who tries to take them from you.”

How do you feel when you are scolded? If you are like most people you don't feel good. But our ultimate goal is not to let people feel badly. That may be necessary to bring about repentance, but the final goal is to restore them. This is what Nehemiah does. He asks the people to stop charging interest and to immediately return everything to those poor people including their property, homes, interest, wine, oil, etc. Nehemiah knew that words alone were not enough. He challenged the people to a specific and achievable action.

III. The people listen to Nehemiah (12-13)

Discussion Questions

- How did the people respond to Nehemiah?
- What can we learn from them?
- What did Nehemiah do to ensure that they followed through? Why was this important?
- Are there any lessons for us in this?
- Do you think Nehemiah's words were too harsh in verse 13? Why or why not?
- What final step of true repentance do we see in verse 13?

Teaching Points

1. Repentance requires changed hearts and changed actions – The people agreed to Nehemiah’s proposal, publicly promising to follow through and do exactly what Nehemiah said. Wow! Wouldn't it be great if we were humble and teachable like this! Wouldn't it be great if we immediately repented when confronted with our sins! Wouldn't it be great if we took whatever steps are necessary to “make it right!” Repentance without changed actions isn't worth very much.

2. Repentance requires follow through – Nehemiah asked all the people to make an oath. He knew how important it was that they don’t backslide. Going back on their commitment would be disastrous for the people's individual walks with the Lord and for the whole nation, to say nothing of the wall project. How do you think of his plan to make them all take an oath? How about his “threat?”

IV. Nehemiah sacrifices for the people (14-19)

Discussion Questions

- What do we learn about Nehemiah's position in this passage?
- What rights did he have as governor?
- What was different about Nehemiah from the other governors?
- What sacrifices did he make? What motivated him to make these sacrifices? What can we learn from his leadership here?
- What kind of a model did Nehemiah set for his fellow Jews?

Teaching Points

1. Nehemiah feared God -

- Because he feared God he sacrificed his personal rights – Unlike the other governors, he did not get the governor's allowance from the people even though he was allowed to do so. This was normal and customary, but Nehemiah did not do it. Why? What did it cost him?
- Because he feared God he sacrificed his time and energy – He himself worked on the wall, together with his servants. A good leader jumps right in to serve. He doesn't ask other people to do what he himself is not willing to do.
- Because he feared God he sacrificed his own money – Instead of demanding the governor's food allowance he served one and hundred and fifty Jewish officials every day at his own cost. That is not cheap! He was not looking after his own interests, but the interests of others.

2. Nehemiah asked God to remember him – Nehemiah was not pursuing earthly rewards or treasures, but heavenly ones.

Nehemiah 6

Outline

- I. Nehemiah won't give in to distraction (1-4)
- II. Nehemiah won't pay attention to gossip (5-9)
- III. Nehemiah won't fall into the temptation of fear (10-14)
- IV. The wall is finished in spite of all opposition (15-19)

I. Nehemiah won't give in to distraction (1-4)

Discussion Questions

- What spurred this new intensified opposition?
- What plan did Sanballat and his co-conspirators come up with?
- How did Nehemiah respond to them?
- After he answered, did they give up? How many times did they attempt to distract him?
- What lessons can we learn from this about temptation? About distraction?
- What can we learn from Nehemiah?
- How can we apply these principles to our own lives?

Cross-References

Proverbs 26:4-5 – Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.

Teaching Points

1. Sanballat and his friends do not give up easily – They learn that great and fast progress has been made on the wall. Instead of giving up, they redouble their attacks. It is said there is nothing more dangerous than a cornered lion. We should also know that even though Satan was defeated at the cross, he is like a cornered lion. He is not giving up. Satan actually has one character quality that can sometimes be good and that is perseverance. Unfortunately, like Sanballat and co, he perseveres in sin.

2. Nehemiah's enemies attempt to distract him – Here we see Sanballat try a common attack. He doesn't tell Nehemiah to tear down the wall. He doesn't tell Nehemiah to quit building the wall. Instead he tries to distract his attention by bogging Nehemiah down in debate and meetings. Also, they hope to remove Nehemiah from the protection of the city and his soldiers so that they could harm him. If they could kill Nehemiah (cut off the head), the work would probably stop. But they couldn't do that while he was surrounded by friends, which is why they hoped to draw him away from his protection.

From this we learn two things.

A. Those who are working for God and motivating others to work for God will be targeted. Satan doesn't care about the passive people who don't do anything for God. But those who arise and start building God's kingdom will be opposed. Be alert and don't be caught by surprise!

B. Be careful that you are not removed from your protection – What protection do we have against sin? Fellowship, counselors, the Word, and accountability are all protections against temptation. One of Satan and his buddies' methods of attack is to separate us from these things which will protect us. One animal by itself is easier for a lion to catch than one animal in a group. Predators try to separate animals from the pack so they will make an easier target. Do not allow yourself to be separated. Do not give up meeting together. Do not become isolated in your Christian walk.

For the husbands, help and support your wives who may be at home a lot to surround themselves with Christian friends and fellowship so that they are not isolated. You too surround yourselves with other believers. Then develop deep relationships with those believers so they can help encourage you when you start to stray.

3. Nehemiah does not give in to distractions – This same refrain is repeated throughout this chapter and the whole book. Nehemiah does not allow himself to be distracted by the schemes of the enemy. He is focused on a very clear goal. Anything that distracts him from that goal is not worth pursuing.

Application: What is your goal? Do you have a goal or goals? Do you know what you are working for? If you don't know then you won't know when you are distracted. If you do know, then you will be able to clearly evaluate and make sure that what you spend your time doing is helping you achieve that goal. Should you get a PHD? Should you change jobs? Should you move to another city?

The answer to those questions depends on your life vision and goal. You will not be able to make wise decisions if you aren't focused on a mission like Nehemiah was. Do not be like a stick floating around wherever the current takes you. Instead control the rudder of your boat to push forward to a specific point.

4. Nehemiah is not willing to debate – Notice Nehemiah gives a short, firm answer. He gets right to the point. He refused to debate or argue about it. Basically he says “no way!” He realizes that engaging in discussion/debate with a fool is pointless. You cannot win an argument against these type of people. You cannot persuade them.

Application: Some conversations are a waste of time. Online comments on news articles are a good example. So many people spend large amounts of time arguing on these types of sites. What good does it do? Is anyone's mind ever changed by these arguments? We need to be wise to know when a conversation is profitable and when it is useless.

II. Nehemiah won't pay attention to gossip (5-9)

Discussion Questions

- After the first four letters to Nehemiah failed to distract him, what new plot did they try?
- What is an open letter?

- How is this similar to the previous accusation that they had made against the Jews?
- How is this different from their previous accusations that they had made?
- How might Sanballat have expected the Jews to respond? How might Sanballat have hoped Nehemiah would respond?
- How did Nehemiah respond to this gossip? Where did he turn to for help?
- When people gossip, slander, or accuse us how should we respond? How should we answer them?
- What verses can you share that speak to this issue?

Cross-References

Proverbs 16:28 – A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends.

Exodus 23:1 – Do not spread false reports. Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness.

Proverbs 10:18 – Whoever conceals hatred with lying lips and spreads slander is a fool.

Titus 3:10 – Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.

1 Peter 3:16 – Keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Teaching Points

1. Sanballat does not give up – He doesn't give up, he just changes tactics. Like father like son. Satan is the same.
2. Sanballat attempts to stop the work through gossip and slander – He hopes to discourage the builders and get them to turn against Nehemiah. He hopes to distract Nehemiah from the work and get him to spend time and energy defending himself instead of leading the wall rebuilding project. Notice that he doesn't cite facts. He cites rumors and “reports.” Of course he doesn't mention that he himself is behind these rumors and reports. Sanballat realized that sending a private letter to Nehemiah wouldn't work so he chose to send an open letter which all the people could hear. He also threatens to tell the king. Finally he offers to “help” Nehemiah by counseling together with him. Of course that counsel would have been something along the lines of, “for your own safety, you should stop rebuilding the wall.” While Sanballat claims to want to help and come alongside Nehemiah as a faithful counselor, only a blind person would not see that he has his own motivations.

Application: Do not always trust what people say. Look at their fruit. Look at their actions. Look deeper. In the New Testament we learn not to be yoked together with unbelievers. In like manner, we should not be linked or work together with those who don't have the same goal as we do. In the book of Ezra the Jews refused to work with their enemies who pretended they wanted to help the Jews rebuild the temple.

3. Nehemiah won't pay attention to the gossip – Nehemiah does not try or need to defend himself. He doesn't try to clear his name. He knows the arguments against him are absurd. His enemies would not be convinced or listen no matter what he said and his friends would not be so gullible to believe this gossip and slander. How can we apply what we learn from Nehemiah here?

- Do not stoop down the level of a gossip or slanderer. It is not generally necessary to defend yourselves against these types of lies. The truth will set you free. If you continue to do what is right, then your good character and good intentions will be proven for all to see.
- Do not allow people's words to discourage you from doing what God wants you to do. Maybe your parents pressure you to marry an unbeliever. Maybe your friends laugh at your Christian belief. Maybe divisive believers spread rumors about you. Don't be distracted! Keep doing what you know God wants you to do!

4. Nehemiah turns to God for strength and comfort – This is the place we should always turn when we face adversity. Hopefully we naturally turn to God in the days of adversity like Nehemiah did. Psalm 50:15.

III. Nehemiah won't fall into the temptation of fear (10-14)

Discussion Questions

- What was Shemaiah's position?
- What “help” did he offer Nehemiah?
- What was the problem with his suggestion?
- What can we learn about temptation knowing that the source of it was a prophet?
- Why did Nehemiah refuse to go into the temple? What can we learn about his character?
- Why does Nehemiah not seem more afraid?
- How do you think Nehemiah “perceived” that the prophet was not speaking from God?
- How can we know when believers around us give good advice and when they give bad advice?
- What was the goal of this new conspiracy?
- What applications can we get from Nehemiah and how he handled it?

Teaching Points

1. Temptation may come from other believers (or at least professing believers) – Nehemiah did not go to Shemaiah's house expecting that he would face temptation there. It is very doubtful Nehemiah thought Shemaiah would be at the center of a plot to get him to sin. And yet it happened nonetheless. This type of temptation could be much more dangerous simply because it is so unexpected.

Application: We must have firm root in God's Word and be familiar with it. If we are familiar with it, wherever and whenever we hear people counsel us falsely we will be able to evaluate it properly and not fall into the trap. Temptation could come from any sources, even unexpected ones.

2. Nehemiah was bold – Should a man like me flee? Nehemiah knew that fleeing would set a bad example for the rest of the people. He had to be bold not only for the sake of his own self, but for the sake of the many people who were relying on him and following his leadership.

3. He refused to do the wrong thing for a good reason – It was wrong for a non-Levite to go into the holy place of the temple. It would seem that was what Shemaiah was asking him to do, which is why Nehemiah refused. It was a case of doing the wrong thing for the right reason. Many people in Nehemiah's position might have justified this act. They could have said things like, “The people need me. If I die, who will lead them? If I die, our enemies win.” But Nehemiah was a person of principle. He realized the very important principle that right and wrong does not depend on circumstances. Right and wrong don't change in the face of extreme circumstances. A person of principle does not allow

circumstances to dictate his actions. Instead principles dictate his actions.

4. We must be perceptive and alert so that we won't fall into temptation – Nehemiah saw through the plot. He realized God would not give a message that was contradictory to what He had already commanded.

5. There will be wolves in sheep's clothing – Some so called Christian workers are such wolves. They appear to be serving God, but are actually serving themselves. They may be motivated by fame, power, or money. Be wary of such people whose loyalty can be bought.

IV. The wall is finished in spite of all opposition (15-19)

Discussion Questions

- What amazing fact is reported in verse 15?
- How was this possible?
- Who realized that it was God's help that allowed them to finish this great task so quickly?
- What do we learn in these verses about Tobiah and his role in the conspiracies? Who helped him?

Teaching Points

1. The temple was finished in fifty-two days – Wow! It could only happen with God's help. At the same time, God used Nehemiah and his excellent leadership to bring about this amazing result.

2. God wins – God's plan was accomplished. No one can stop His plans. If you read to the end of the Bible in Revelation you will also see that God wins. Choose the right side. God's side will face lots of adversity and opposition, but at the end of the day, that is the winning side. If you serve Him faithfully you can accomplish great things for Him. What is your goal? What does He want you to accomplish? Are you being distracted or are you focused in on what He wants you to do? Do you know what God wants you to do? If so, are you doing it?

Nehemiah 7

Outline

- I. Nehemiah organizes after the wall is finished (7:1-5)
- II. Genealogies of the the people who returned in the first wave (6-69)
- III. People donate to the work (70-73)

I. Nehemiah organizes after the wall is finished (7:1-5)

Discussion Questions

- What did Nehemiah do after the wall had been finished?
- How did he start to take them forward from pre-wall life to post-wall life?
- What do we learn about Nehemiah from this?
- What type of people did he put in charge? Why is this important?
- What is the point of Nehemiah's plans in verse 3?
- What did Nehemiah plan to do in verse 5? How did he get this idea? How does this relate to chapter 8?

Teaching Points

1. Verse 1 – Rebuilding the wall wasn't the end. It was the beginning. There was still work to be done. Nehemiah wanted to make sure that things would run smoothly and not regress. There are times to build and there are times to preserve what has been built. Imagine how foolish it would be if after all of that work rebuilding the wall a tactical mistake allowed the enemy to come in to the city and defeat them. Nehemiah continues to organize and delegate and make sure that every detail is attended to.

2. He puts wise leaders in charge – He appoints leaders that he knows and trusts. He appoints leaders who fear God and are men of integrity (this is what Paul also commanded in 1 Timothy and Titus about appointing elders.)

3. Nehemiah sets rules for the opening and closing of the gates and appoints guards – If one gate was left open at the wrong time or if one spot was unguarded all of their work may have been done for nothing. Nehemiah understood that their achievements and past victories would not guarantee that the enemy would stop trying to destroy them. The enemy would persevere and so should they. Before he surveyed the wall to find the weakness in order to fix. Now his enemy would survey the wall to find the weakness in order to attack.

Application: We should be alert and aware. We should understand our weaknesses and take appropriate measures to protect ourselves from temptation in those areas. For example?

4. Nehemiah called the people together – God put this idea in his heart. We will see the result of this in chapter 8. Worshiping God is a community affair. Both in the Old Testament and now we need to fellowship with other believers. Corporate worship and fellowship is the public side of our faith. We can both receive from and give encouragement to others. We can challenge each other. Two are stronger than one. Together we are stronger than we are by ourselves. Be sure you regularly fellowship with and serve God together with other believers.

5. Genealogies of the the people who returned in the first wave (6-69)

Discussion Questions

- How many people returned in the first wave?
- Who led them?
- Are there any lessons we can learn from their return?

Teaching Points

1. Many of the families made the decision to go back to Jerusalem. It was certainly not an easy decision.

Most of them were born and raised in the Babylonian (and the Persian) Empire. This was “home” to them in a sense. The people they knew were there. Their houses were there. They had friends there. They had careers and jobs and possessions. They had security. Back in Jerusalem they wouldn’t know what to expect. Certainly there would be dangers both on the way and when they arrived back. They would have to start their lives completely from scratch, facing difficulties and opposition they had never dreamed of. But they made the choice to go because God stirred their hearts. God put this desire in their hearts and they responded. In their heart, they knew that Babylon wasn’t really their home. It wasn’t the land God had promised to them. Judah was their home. In like manner we are also aliens in this world and our citizenship is in heaven, where our heart should also be.

Application: These people obeyed God’s will for them much like their ancestor Abraham had done so long before. We must be willing to obey Christ no matter how much it costs. That is what it means to be His disciple.

The list in Nehemiah the 7 is the same as the list in Ezra 2. Here are a few observations:

The people each returned to his own city. Although seventy years had passed they continued keeping track of family lines and property ownership.

Ezra numbers all the people meticulously, giving a clear impression of a very organized return. It is not chaos. Everything is done in order. The leaders taking them back know exactly who is going back and where they will go and who they are with. This gives a certain amount of safety and accountability. You can imagine they also likely did some periodic counts to make sure that everyone who left Babylon was still safe and in the caravan.

We see some people from all of the key groups returning including: Benjamin, Judah, Levites, Priests, and Temple Servants.

If you add up all the numbers given in the first part of the chapter, it is actually around 10,000 short of the number given in verse 64. This is explained by the fact that Ezra doesn’t list out everyone by family, probably not including the numbers for non-Judah and Benjamin tribes.

We also see that there are a couple of groups who could not find records of their ancestry. They were therefore excluded from serving as a priest until a priest could ascertain God’s will for them from the Urim and Thummim.

Upon returning to the land, one of the first things they did was give a contribution to the temple to build the foundation. This appears to be by a volunteer basis. The people freely give of what they received when they left Babylon. This gets the temple construction project off to a good start.

The number of people returning seem very few. There are only 42,360. Contrast that with the likely 2 million people leaving Egypt at the Exodus. We can see Israel has been humbled. It’s position is very low. They have no standing, status, or power in world affairs. The few things they have were mostly given to them by charity. They only have the right to be there because the leader of the empire they now serve gave them permission. No more are they a strong, proud, independent nation. They are lowly servants dependant on the crumbs falling from their masters’ table.

What can we learn from this? God certainly blessed them and showed them His grace to allow them to return. But sin doesn’t come without consequences. God eventually forgave them and restored them.

But what they were restored to was much less than what they lost before.

In our own lives, God will always be willing to forgive us and accept us back again, but it doesn't mean that we can get everything we had before we sinned. Therefore by far the best choice is to never stray from or disobey God.

III. People donate to the work (70-73)

Discussion Questions

- Who donated?
- What kind of things did they donate?
- What can we learn from them?

Nehemiah 8

Outline

I. Ezra reads the Word to all the people (8:1-8)

II. The people rejoice and celebrate (9-12)

III. The people apply what they learn by celebrating the Feast of Booths (13-18)

Discussion Questions

- Who joined this gathering?
- What was their "spirit" or "attitude?"
- Why did they get together?
- What did they want to do when they got together?
- How long did Ezra read? What did he read about?
- What was the people's attitude like?
- What did the people do when Ezra started reading?
- How did the people respond to the reading?
- What do we learn from verse 8? What was Ezra's goal beyond just reading it?

Teaching Points

Key theme – The people respect God's Word. This is shown by them desiring to learn it and paying attention to it.

1. The people gathered as one – The work they had done unified them and they saw the tremendous result of what had happened when they worked together to rebuild the wall. Seeing what they could accomplish when working together in unity, encouraged them to continue working together. We learned at the beginning of chapter 7 that Nehemiah called the people together. His example had inspired them to the point that they all responded to his summons. Unity was important for the Jewish remnant. It is also important for us to be unified with other believers, to unite to work together and to unite to study

God's Word together, not allowing petty differences to distract us from the goal of building for God.

2. They asked Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses out – The people took initiative to ask Ezra to bring out the book of the law (Genesis to Deuteronomy). It shows real maturity that they wanted to learn about God's Word. The focus of their get together was not partying. It was not drinking. It was not feasting. It was not having fun. It was not music. It was not chit-chat or catching up. The focus of their time together was God's Word. Some of the other things came later, but God's Word was the epicenter of everything else. God's Word could help them grow. It could strengthen them. It could change their hearts and change their lives. God's Word was their (and is ours) spiritual nourishment. (Verses on God's Word: Hebrews 4:12, Matthew 24:35, Proverbs 4:20-22, Colossians 3:16, Isaiah 40:8, Psalm 119:103, Mark 13:31, 1 Peter 2:2). The Jews' initiative to ask for the law to be read showed that they loved God's Words. God's Word was sweet to them like honeycomb.

Application: Do you desire God's Word like this? If you have free time, will you choose to just open up and enjoy reading the Bible? Is God's Word the center of your meetings with other believers?

3. Men and women and everyone who could understand joined – God's Word is not just for some people. It is not just for men or women or old or young. It is for all. It can benefit everyone. Even children joined in.

Application: These days people are often in a hurry to send the children off. Some think children are a nuisance or a distraction. Others think that children cannot understand or are too young. Others may just let their children go and play because it is easier. We should not talk down to our children. We should teach them up. If you never teach your child something he doesn't know he will never learn from you. We should help our children to improve their focus and improve their understanding by challenging them and stimulating them instead of taking the easy way out.

Illustration: I once was teaching a class for young children and mothers. During the class I asked the mothers to talk and communicate with their children and ask them questions. One mother said, "My kid doesn't know how to talk." Her reasoning was that since her child didn't know how to talk she didn't need to talk to him! In this case, how will any children learn something new!

4. Ezra read from early morning to midday - People were able to get up early to listen. The church I go to many of the people are late, often very late. It doesn't even start until 10:00. There is no good excuse for this to happen week after week. If you desire God's Word, get up early enough to be on time. You can also get up early to read it before going off to work.

People were able to listen (and pay attention) for a large chunk of the day – These days our attention span is shamefully short. If the speaker goes on for 40 minutes a lot of people in many churches will be sleeping, checking their watches, or messing with their smart phones. An hour and a half is considered an eternity. How many of us would enjoy joining a service that lasted most of the day? How many could focus and pay attention for that long? If you love God's Word you need to exercise your mind by paying attention carefully and increasing your attention span. Do not be in a hurry to leave church or fellowship. Do not get bored and tired of listening to the Word easily. If you love the Word you will want more of it, not less.

5. Respecting the Word of God means preparing – The people prepared a wooden podium. This allowed everyone to see and hear Ezra. Building the podium and moving it into position was work, but it was work that was well spent. If we respect God's Word we will want to find more ways to aid the

spreading of it. What work can you do to aid the spread of God's Word?

6. The people stood up to listen to the Word of God – Why? It showed their respect. They took it seriously. They realized it was direct revelation from God. It looks like they stayed standing for the entire time! This would have been exhausting. Try standing up in one place for an hour. It's tiring. Doing that for hours and hours is very difficult. It requires a lot of energy. When you respect God's Word you will make sacrifices for it. It will cost you energy. It will cost you time. It may inconvenience you. But it is worth it. We should take God's Word seriously. We should make it a priority. If it is a priority, you will sacrifice for it. What can you sacrifice? Sleep, time, entertainment, etc.

7. The result of respecting God's Word is praise – Spending time learning and studying God's Word brings about changes in the life of the person who does so. God's Word will not return void. It is living and active. The person who loves to read and study the Bible is a person who will love to praise and worship God. The two go hand in hand. In the Bible we learn about God's greatness and our sinfulness. After we look at God and see His greatness we will respond by worshiping God. They expressed this worship verbally, but also physically by bowing. Later they would express their changed hearts by obeying what they learned.

8. They read from the law – Ezra was not the only one reading. Other Levites also read and instructed the people. It seems that the large group split into smaller groups. The smaller groups were led by Levites. These Levites read the law. Then they explained it making it clear and understandable to the people. The goal of their speaking was to make God's Words clear.

9. Biblical preaching – This is the same goal of biblical preaching. When we preach or teach our goal should not be to share our own opinions. It should simply be to make clear what the Bible already says. We can use illustrations or examples or stories to make it clear. Our job is not to make it relevant. It is already relevant. Our job is not to ask what “does it mean to you?” Our job is to ask “what does it mean?” Our job is to encourage people to obey what they learn. Albert Einstein once said, “If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.”

II. The people rejoice and celebrate (9-12)

Discussion Questions

- Why had the people been weeping? What does this show about the attitude of the people? Was this good or bad?
- Why did their leaders tell them not to weep?
- What should they do instead of weeping?
- What can we learn about fellowship?
- What can you learn from the phrase “the joy of the Lord is your strength?”
- What role did the Levites have in the teaching (they reinforced what the other leaders said?)
- Why were the people so happy in verse 12?

Cross-References

Matthew 5:3-4 - Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

2 Corinthians 7:10 – Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but

worldly sorrow brings death.

Revelation 21:4 – He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death'[a] or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Teaching Points

1. This day is holy to the Lord – We should make the Lord the priority in our lives every day. And yet some days we set aside as special days to focus completely on Him, His Word, and worshiping Him. One of the ten commandments was for the Israelites to dedicate the Sabbath day to make it holy to the Lord. In addition, they were to regularly celebrate various feasts, the main purpose of which was to remember what God had done for them.

Application: We too must regularly set aside time as “holy to the Lord.” On those days or during those times we should rid ourselves of distractions and focus on God.

2. All the people were weeping – Why? From this we see their hearts. They had contrite hearts. When they heard the Law, they started weeping because they realized that they had been disobeying many commands. They realized how far short of God's standards they fell. Is this good or bad? This is good. It shows that they understood who God was and they understood who they were. The people were unable to live up to God's standards. Their failure was fresh in their minds. To their credit, they didn't deny it. Others may have responded by being angry. Some may have responded by getting upset at the prophets or leaders. We know when Jeremiah gave the scroll to the king, the king burned it. Not everyone responds to God's word the way that they should. In fact, most do not.

Application: When you listen to God's Word and learn about the serious state of your sin, how do you respond? Do you ignore it? Do you try to push it away from your mind? Do you justify it or excuse it? Are you mildly disappointed in yourself for a short time? Or do you weep? Does it really bother you to the point where you are in tears? It should.

3. Do not mourn or weep – If their response was a good one, then why did the leaders tell them to stop mourning and weeping? See Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Mourning about sin is good. But it is not good to remain in the state of weeping forever. The weeping is good not because it is the end goal. Sorrow about sin is not the goal. Sorrow is a means to an end. Grief is a strong emotion that can motivate you to do something. The end goal is life change. The goal is changed action. The end goal is obedience. I don't believe God desires for us to go through our whole lives crying on and on about our sin. Neither does He desire us to go through our lives complacently ignoring our sins. The right balance is to first weep/grieve and then channel that emotion into motivation for changing our lives. If we look at this passage, this is exactly what we will see happening.

4. Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet – Nehemiah and Ezra wanted the people to celebrate. Yes, they had sinned. Yes, they had been disobedient. But they also had a lot to be thankful for. They had a lot to rejoice about. What could they celebrate? Many had returned to the Promised Land. God had preserved a remnant and preserved their land. God had been with them as they rebuilt the wall and it was finished. God had protected them from their enemies. It was to be a day of celebration. There is a time to weep and a time to celebrate.

Application: We could be sad about our sin everyday or we could rejoice in God's goodness everyday. How do we decide which to do when? The main thing to remember is that there is a balance. Don't go

too far in either direction.

5. Send portions to him who has nothing – In their feasting they were to remember the poor. Instead of keeping what they had to themselves, God wanted them to generously share what they had with others. Everyone had something to celebrate, poor or rich. The generosity and sharing displayed encouraged the people in unity and reminded everyone they were part of the same team.

Application: When good things happen to you, do you remember those who don't have anything? When you are at a party and enjoying yourself, do you look around and reach out to the person who is lonely? Do you just think of making yourself happy or do you try to make others around you happy? The real key to true joy is to give it to others. The more joy you give to others, the more you will have yourself.

6. The joy of the Lord is your strength – What does this phrase mean? Joy in the Lord could give them strength. Rejoicing in God's goodness would re-energize them. After building the wall and also being reminded of their sins, they needed to be recharged spiritually. They needed to be re-energized. Connecting with the Lord by joyfully worshiping Him and celebrating His goodness and remembering what He had done for them could help them be re-energized.

Application: We need both nutrition coming in (through the Word) and praise going out to be a healthy believer strengthened by God.

7. They understood the words – It is a simple point, but an important one. When they understood the words, they became excited. Everything became clear, who they were, what they needed to do. This too should be our goal. It will not help someone if you share with them one hundred deep doctrinal points, but if they are confused the whole time. Our goal is to help people understand. It is not about looking smart. It is not about sounding professional. It is simply about helping people understand. If using an illustration or example when sharing with others helps them understand, use it. If it doesn't help them understand, chuck it.

II. The people apply what they learn by celebrating the Feast of Booths (13-18)

Discussion Questions

- In verse 12 we learned that the people understood the words. What did they do as a result?
- What did the people do on the second day of their grand assembly? What do you think it means to “give attention to the law?” What was their purpose in giving attention to the law? What can we learn from this?
- What does the word “found” suggest in verse 14?
- What did they find out?
- What did they do about it? What can we learn from them? Specifically, what can we learn about application and obedience?
- What did their obedience cost them? Was this convenient?
- What was the purpose of this festival?
- Can we do anything similar to remember what God has done for us?
- Who joined this celebration? What was unique about this event?
- What was their focus during this festival? What does this show us about their hearts?

Cross-References

Leviticus 23:33-44 – In this passage we can learn the background of the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles)
1 John 3:18 – Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

James 4:17 – If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

Psalm 119:60 – I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands.

Teaching Points

1. On the second day – On the second day of the assembly, the people got together to... study the law... again. Studying God's Word is not something you can do once and then finish. It is not something you can finish in a day, even if you listen to an all day sermon. To really understand God's Word we need to come back to it again and again. It seems like this second assembly, they studied God's law with the purpose that they wanted to find out what they should DO. It seems they were looking specifically for commands which had been given which they were not following. They weren't getting together to feel good about themselves. They weren't looking for commands which they were already obeying so that they could say, "Yes, I am doing a good job already." Rather they wanted to find out if there were any commands which they were not yet obeying. If so, then they needed to change. Wow! Wouldn't it be great if we too looked at the Scriptures with this same goal!

They found written in the law – Seek and you will find. When they looked with an eye for learning and obeying, they found something which they needed to obey.

2. Feast of Booths – See Leviticus 23:33-44. The Israelites were commanded to celebrate this feast annually. But they hadn't done it in around eight hundred years! Even godly kings like David, Hezekiah, and Josiah hadn't been obeying this command. Why? What was the matter?

Application: There is always room for growth. None of us obeys all of God's commands. But this should be our goal. We should always be looking for those areas we are not obeying and then start obeying. Don't be satisfied with an 80% or 90% or 99% obedience rate. Even many heroes in the Old Testament stopped short of complete obedience. Let us keep moving onward and upward in growth to be more like Christ every day.

3. God's Word is the authority. Don't look to tradition for the answer of what you should do. Just because everybody is doing something or no one is doing something, doesn't make it right. In the case of this festival, every person (even the prophets) had been disobeying. Some did so out of ignorance. Others perhaps because it was not convenient. We must seek to obey every command even if we are the only one. What would have happened in previous years if one faithful Jew pitched his tent in his yard every year to celebrate this feast?

4. Obeying this festival was not very convenient – It meant living on a roof or in the yard under a temporary shelter built from leavers and branches gathered from wherever they could find them. If this was the preferred living environment people would have done that all the time. It also required setting aside time from people's normal business and career to focus on God. They had to take time out from their busy schedule, which was not convenient. But perhaps this was exactly God's point. Perhaps God did not want them to be so busy all the time making money. Perhaps God wanted them to set aside time just for remembering what He had done for them, sharing and talking about it together, praying, worshiping, studying the law, etc.

Application: How can we apply this? It is not always convenient for us to obey God. We have busy lives. We have comfortable lives. Maybe it is time we stopped being so busy. Maybe it is time we set aside time just for God.

5. There was great rejoicing – Do you want the secret formula for being joyful? Do you want to be happy? This is what most people search their whole lives for. I will give you the “secret” formula. It is tried and true. It is guaranteed to work or your money back. Obeying God results in joy. Try it. It works.

6. He read from the book of the law of God daily – The festival was not just a seven day camping break. It had a purpose. The purpose was to draw close to God. Therefore God's Word was at the center. God's Word should be at the center of our gatherings. Next time you get together with other believers, find a way to get the Bible into it. It could be reading a Psalm or Proverb before dinner. It could be a one minute Bible testimony. You can start with, “This morning I read in the Bible about...” It could be asking a question from the Bible to get people thinking.

Nehemiah 9:1-4

Outline

- I. The people gather to study the Word, confess sins, and worship (1-5)
- II. The people praise God and recall what He has done for them (6-21)
- III. The people gather to study the Word, confess sins, and worship (1-5)

I. The people gather to study the Word, confess sins, and worship (1-5)

Discussion Questions

- How long had passed since the end of the festival?
- Why did the people gather this time?
- What was the point of the sackcloth and dirt?
- What was the attitude of the people?
- Why did they gather together?
- What did they do? How long did they do it? Why is this important that they spent so long doing it?
- What can we learn from them? About the Word? About confession? About worship?
- Who is crying out to God in verses 4-5?
- How would you describe their prayer?

Teaching Points

1. The events of chapter 9 take place 23 days after the events of 8:1.
2. The second grand assembly – The focus of the last grand assembly was celebration. This time around, the focus is on confession/repentance. When they heard the law of God read the previous time, they

were convicted of their sins. The people knew that they had disobeyed God in many areas. Nothing is that shocking about the story so far. It is fairly normal and also good for people to react to God's Word like that. However, when people walk away from a meeting like that, they simply go back to their everyday lives and forget about what they learned. Many people will feel sorry about their sins in the moment, but allow the business of life to take over again when they leave that spiritual get together and return to their normal lives. The fact that the Jews were still grieving about their sin over three weeks later tell us that they took God's Word very seriously. It shows us the depth of their conviction.

3. Their repentance was shown by the depth of their grief. Physically they showed the proper signs of confession including wearing sackcloth and putting dirt on themselves. Both of these were uncomfortable practices practiced by those who were grieving. Their physical discomfort would be a constant reminder of the person's spiritual state.

4. Their repentance was shown by their sacrifice. We learn in verse 1 that they fasted. Fasting requires giving up something that our body and our mind wants. It is self-sacrificing momentary comfort and/or pleasure for the sake of focusing on God. It also requires self-discipline. What do you sacrifice for God? In Romans 12:1 we are commanded to be living sacrifices. Are we willing to sacrifice our wants, our desires, our pleasure, our comfort in order to focus on God?

5. Their repentance was shown by their changed behavior. In verse two we learn that the "descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners." What does that mean? We can look at Ezra 9-10 for a comparison. In Ezra 9-10 the people had disobeyed God's commands by intermarrying with the foreign pagan nations around them. This sin provoked Ezra's extreme reaction in Ezra 9. The final solution was for the people to send these foreigners away (ie: to separate from them.) It is likely that in Nehemiah this separation is along the same lines. Thus those who had disobeyed God's Word by having relationship with the foreigners around them here repented by separated from those ungodly influences. See notes on bottom of the page for comments about the same situation in Ezra 10:

Application: What application can we get from this? We must separate from ungodly influences and relationships (See 2 Corinthians 6:14-17.) The companion of the wise will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm. If you have friends who are influencing you to do sinful things get away from them. If something like certain books, certain apps, certain websites, certain technology is influencing you to do sinful things, separate. If you are thinking of becoming closer friends or dating an unbeliever, don't do it. Separate. Separating can be painful, but it is necessary for our spiritual growth.

6. Stood and confessed – Here again we see that they weren't afraid of a little physical discomfort. Also, the people practiced public and corporate confession. Should we? Why or why not? See James 5:16.

7. Read from the book of the Law for a fourth of the day – As we learned in chapter 8, the people respect God's Word. God's Word is the focal point when they get together. They want to listen to it. They want to learn from it. They want to study it. They want to understand it. They want to do it. Just weeks before they had gathered together and studied God's Word. But that wasn't enough. They wanted more of it. Just like physical hunger drives us to food day after day spiritual hunger should drive us to God's Word day after day. When you love God's Word like they did you will not feel it is inconvenient to dedicate lots of time and energy to study it. You will not feel you are too busy to set aside chunks of time to learn it. You will not feel that God's Word is too dull and boring. You will crave for it. You will

be excited whenever you have the chance to study it deeper. You will want to share it with others. You will want to stay in study or church longer, not leave earlier. You will ask to stretch the Bible study to four hours instead of two.

Application: How do you feel about God's Word? Do you feel bored when you come to study? Is your mind somewhere else? Or are you excited about it and committed to it? See Hebrews 6:1,12.

8. Confessed and worshiped for another fourth – See Isaiah 55:11. God's Word does not return void. When you love God's Word like they do...when you hunger for it...when you are excited about it...when you study it...it WILL change you. You will not be the same. God's Word is powerful and the Holy Spirit uses it to convict us of our sin and to stir our hearts to worship the God we learn about in His word. Studying God's Word lets us to see both God and ourselves correctly. When we see our own sinful state reflected by the mirror of the Bible, we should want to confess our sins. We should learn from the Jews here not to just make a rapid-fire "I'm sorry" and then go right to our normal lives. Also, when we study the word we see God's righteousness, holiness, power, love, compassion, etc. It is then that we will want to worship this great God we learn about. We see some of the words of their prayer of worship written down starting in verse 5 and going through the end of the chapter. Application: We should also spontaneously worship God after reading His Word. When we do study it, we should meditate on God's character and then praise God for His character in our prayers. After all, the chief purpose of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

9. Had separated themselves from foreigners (verse 2) - (For more on this problem of intermarriage with unbelieving foreigners see Ezra 9-10.)

On Divorce -

A. First we need to know God's view of divorce. The biblical view of divorce is VERY different from the view in the world. Culture tells us that divorce is an acceptable option when the two sides just cannot resolve their differences. People fall in love and then after a while this "love" grows cold and they "fall out" of love. Love is seen as something that comes and goes and people will make the excuse that "I can't help it." They don't decide to not love the person anymore, it "just happens." When this random anti-love bug strikes, the couple feels justified in getting a divorce. They often offer the excuse that it is not fair to the kids or their spouse to put them through a marriage that doesn't have that spark anymore. Money is a leading cause of divorce. Finding a younger and more attractive partner is another.

Amazingly I read recently that arguments over housework is one of the leading causes of divorce. Although when people get married they make vows, these vows are cast aside as soon as difficulty comes. This view of divorce is a stark contrast with the Bible. Read cross-references. God's plan has always been one man and one woman for life, literally until death do them part. See Genesis 2:24.

Malachi tells us that God hates divorce. Jesus went even further to say that divorce and remarriage is adultery. He did give one possible exception, which is the infidelity of one partner. Bible scholars debate whether there is any basis for divorce, but it is reasonable to conclude that there is only one and that is infidelity. When we look at the whole context of Scripture, we know that we should forgive even seventy times seven times. So this clause should not be considered a reason to pull the trigger on a marriage after one mistake by the spouse. A godly spouse should forgive again and again. Normally a person who is brazenly committing adultery without repenting will divorce the Christian anyway, at which point the Christian should let the person go (1 Corinthians 7).

B. If God hates divorce why did Ezra and Nehemiah agree with this plan to separate from them? I can think of two reasons.

a) God hates divorce, but God also hates their sin of getting married to pagan people who would lead them astray from God. Although it is not often a good practice to rank sins, this case could be the exception. Basically the people got themselves into a serious dilemma. There were two bad choices with no good way out. Bad choice number 1 equals staying married to these people. The result would likely be disastrous in that a huge part of the remnant would gradually fall away from God. Bad choice number 2 is to immediately end these relationships. This would cause some collateral damage (specifically the children), but was a necessary step to ensure the spiritual purity of the nation. There is an important lesson here. The lesson is that our sin can lead us into situations from which there is no good way out. Remember that God did not lead them into this dilemma. He warned them against it. Their own sinful choices led them into it. Can you think of other examples where our sin leads us into dilemmas? In Exodus we saw how a person's bad financial choices could lead them to sell themselves or even worse, a child. By far the best solution is to obey God on the front side. If you do, you will avoid these types of "lesser of two evil" choices.

b) We should also keep in mind the fragile state of the remnant. There was a small remnant of people who returned to Jerusalem. They were unprotected (there were no walls). They were few in number. Their faith was volatile. God had already been judging them for their sins. Another deliberate and prolonged rebellion against God could be disastrous. So my conclusion about this issue is that desperate times call for desperate measures. This narrative account should not be used as a justification for any believer to get a divorce. Instead we should look at the didactic teaching passages in the Bible for guidelines on this and view this as an extreme situation that called for an extreme solution."

Nehemiah 9:5-38

Group Activity: Plan to have a special group discussion time to stimulate discussion and encourage group participation. Split into small groups. Assign group facilitators. Give 45 minutes for discussion. Give each group the following questions to consider about the passage and ask them to prepare to give feedback to the large group after the time is over.

Questions for small groups to look at:

- What do you learn about God?
- What do you learn about people?
- What principles can you learn about prayer? How should you change your prayer life based on this passage?
- This passage records a lot of Israel's history. What can learn from their history?
- What do you plan to apply from this passage?

After the time is over get back together into large group and have each group share what you have learned.

Highlight:

Remember - The Bible uses this word 231 times. Many times it is about God remembering His people and His covenant. Also, many times it is a command for God's people to remember what He has done for them. Remembering what God has done for us and for His people throughout history reminds us of His faithfulness. We see that He has been faithful again and again. He always keeps His promises. He doesn't neglect His people. He will therefore continue to be faithful and He will not forget us.

Praise – Our prayers should be filled with praise for God. In this passage we see many types of praise:

Giving glory to Him (5)

Highlighting the uniqueness of God (6)

Remembering His God's creative power (6)

Highlighting God's care for His people (9)

Remembering God's miracles (11-12)

Describing His amazing character (17, 19)

Being thankful for His provision (20,21)

Praising Him for His blessings in our life (21)

Our sinfulness – The point of their entire prayer is that God is holy and awesome and faithful, but they were sinful, rebellious and unfaithful. It is only because of God's great compassion and mercy that He forgives, restores, cleanses, and preserves His people. When we look at their history we can see our lives inside. We too have rebelled against God. We too have been unfaithful. We too have sinned again and again. Yet He is compassionate and willing to forgive us and restore us. We could put our own names inside and accurately describe our own relationship.

See verse 17, "Jason refused to listen, and did not remember your wondrous deeds which You had performed among me; So I became stubborn...But You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness, and You did not forsake me."

To end this chapter split into small groups and ask people to pray in pairs or threes specifically focusing on confession and on praising God for what He has done for us.

Nehemiah 10

Outline

- I. The names of the people who signed the agreement (1-27)
- II. The people make an oath to take certain actions in service of God (28-39)

II. The people make an oath to take certain actions in service of God (28-39)

Discussion Questions

- Did all of the people sign the agreement?
- Did the people who did not sign the agreement support it? Where do you see that?
- What do we learn about unity in verse 28-29?
- What gave them their unity?
- What was the key element of this agreement?
- What can we learn from the people's attitude in verse 29?
- Was it wise that they agreed to suffer a curse if they didn't fulfill their oath?
- What exactly did they agree to do?

Teaching Points

1. Verses 28-29 – In these verses we learn that all the people supported this agreement which their leaders had made. The whole nation was on board from the priests and Levites, to the servants, to the women and children. They had already taken the first step to serve God by separating themselves from ungodly influences. Now they decided together to go above and beyond. We learn several key principles from their agreement.

A. Unity among God's people is very important. Imagine what the result of this agreement would be if only half of the people agreed. Imagine if only half of the delegates in the Continental Congress supported the US Declaration of Independence. The point is that for great change to take place unity is important. Lack of unity will bring about division, factions, and arguing. They could not have built the wall in fifty-two days without unity. And they could not change their nation's bad habits and the sinful lifestyle they had slipped into without working together to change things. See John 17:20-23.

We also need to be united to serve God together. We should not walk around looking for things to disagree with other believers about. Neither should we be quick to pass judgment and divide or let differences of opinion on obscure biblical points keep us from working together. The church has a huge task and that is to reach the world for Christ. That is not going to happen if we don't learn how to work together. We also need unity in our families. We need unity with our ministry partners.

Application: How can we improve our unity with the believers around us?

B. Making sacrifices for God changes people's lives – They had separated from the ungodly influences of having relationships with unbelievers. These relationships were like a burden pulling them down. It was as if they were trying to move forward all while being pulled backwards. Imagine an athlete who is in a race. Only someone else is tied together with this athlete. While he tries to go forward, the other person pulls him back. I'm pretty sure he is not going to win the race. That is what it is like if you try to serve God, but refuse to separate from ungodly influences and relationships. You will be stuck. You will not move forward. Here we see that once they cut the cord they were able to move forward. They were able to make important decisions. They had cut off the dead weight. That was the first step. Many other steps followed. When you make big sacrifices for God, it will change your life. You will not be the

same. What sacrifice do you need to make for God? What ungodly influence do you need to get rid of?

C. They made a commitment to serve God – You are a new employee at a company. You have heard that sometimes the boss may ask employees to do unethical things such as change numbers around on paperwork or lie to customers. Those who do whatever the boss wants will be rewarded with promotion.

When should you decide what you will do if the boss asks you to do something unethical? Is it easier to decide to do what's right when you are sitting in a chair in his office or ahead of time when you are at home or in Bible study? It's easier to make that decision ahead of time.

You should make that commitment between you and God (and also you could tell brothers or sisters) ahead of time so that when you are called in to that office you already know what you will do. In the heat of the moment, it is easy to give in to sinful pressures and temptation. Making a commitment or a promise to God ahead of time will make it easier for you to make the right choice when the time comes. In what areas can you make this type of commitment ahead of time? Here a few ideas:

- Time spent reading Bible or praying
- Setting aside time for evangelism.
- Tithing.
- Deciding on standards for how much physical touch is appropriate in a guy/girl relationship.

2. They took their commitment seriously – The people were so serious about their commitment that they were willing to be cursed if they didn't follow through. The commitment they made was not an empty one. They had every intention to follow through. What steps can we take to help ensure that we follow through on commitments we make to God?

6. They made a commitment to obey all of God's commands – Notice that they didn't just pick out one or two things to obey. Together they made a joint decision to obey all of God's commands. We saw in chapter 8 that included laws which hadn't been obeyed in a thousand years. We too should obey all of God's commands no matter how inconvenient or out of practice.

7. Verse 30 – They agreed not to intermarry with the people of the land.

In chapter 9:2 they had already separated themselves from these sinful relationships. But victory yesterday does not guarantee victory tomorrow. Intermarriage was a continual temptation. The Israelites had to guard against falling back into the same sin. Therefore they made a commitment together that they would not support this practice in any way, either themselves or their children. Notice that they don't give any conditions or any exceptions. Instead they simply agree not to do it.

Application: We too should not tolerate sin. We should be careful not to backslide. It would be wise if we evaluate ourselves so that we can understand our weaknesses. If we are weak in certain areas, we need to take extra measures in those areas to guard against temptation. How can you take steps to ensure that you won't backslide and fall into the same sins again and again?

8. Verse 31 – They agreed not to conduct business on the Sabbath. (See Leviticus 23:3 and Isaiah 58:13-14)

One of the major problems of the Israelites after the return to Jerusalem was that they pursued their

own “kingdoms” instead of God's. We learn in Haggai that they were making luxurious upgrades to their own houses while the temple was not even built and the city was in ruins. As a culture and as a people they had become very materialistic. One result seems to be that in their efforts to make as much money/profit as possible, they had begun to disregard the rules about the Sabbath. It was no longer a day of rest dedicated to worshipping God. Instead it was just another day for themselves, another day to make money. Or another day to buy and sell in the market. If they were really serious about serving God first in ALL areas, then they would have to make sacrifices. Here is a tangible way to restore God to his place and put Him first again.

Application: Are you building God's kingdom or are you building your own kingdom? Do you allow your work to keep you from serving God? Do you allow a desire for wealth, materials, or a promotion cause you to become busy pursuing the things of the world? Today is the day to make a commitment to put God first in your work.

9. Verse 31b – They agreed to renew following the rules of the Sabbath year. (See Leviticus 25:1-7)

Historically farmers have sometimes allowed fields to go fallow for periods of time. This allows the soil to keep its productivity long term. Each specific kind of crop leeches certain nutrients from the soil. By allowing a field to go fallow, time is given for the nutrients to be restored and for the soil's natural fertility to be restored. Modern technology often makes heavy use of fertilizer and chemicals which are themselves often unhealthy and can destroy soil's fertility over a long period of time. It seems God was mandating a practice that allowed the fertile land in Israel to maintain its fertility long term. In addition, God wanted the people to discipline themselves to obey His commands and focus on Him rather than becoming greedy to maximize profits.

10. Verse 32-33 – They agreed to give to support the work of the priests in the temple.

Here was another area where the people's greed and materialism was hindering God's work. How could the Levites and Priests effectively perform the ministry God had given to them if they weren't supported? The answer is simple: they couldn't. Lack of support would drive the priests and Levites to quit the ministry (at least temporarily) and go make a living. When they quit the ministry, service for God suffered. The law could not be taught or copied if there was no one to do it. Sacrifices could not be offered if there were no priests.

In the Old Testament and New Testament God's model for ministry is the same. He wants His people to support His work. It is this financial support that enables Christian workers, missionaries, and pastors to serve God without worrying about where their next meal is coming from.

Application: All of us should actively support those who do God's work. If you are not currently supporting God's work, now is a good day to make a commitment to do so. Today we are learning that we should make a commitment to put God first in all areas. That includes financial areas. Is God, the God of your finances? Do you use your finances for His glory or for your own ambition?

11. Verse 34-35 – They agreed to supply the priests with supplies including wood (34) and food (35).

Here are some verses for discussion:

Proverbs 3:9-10 – Give of your firstfruits to God.

Leviticus 23:10-14 – Bring the firstfruits of the harvest to the priest.

2 Chronicles 31:5 – They brought in the tithe of firstfruits abundantly.
Malachi 3:10 – Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.

12. Verse 36 – They agreed to dedicate their firstborn to God. (See Exodus 13:2 and 22:29.)

13. We should not only put God first in our career, our finances, and our decisions, but we should also put God first in our families. Consecrating the firstborn was commanded by God to all the Israelites. It was an ever present reminder of what God had done for them in Exodus. God had saved them from death and slavery. He had passed over them in judgment of the Egyptians. Therefore each of them (but specifically the firstborn) belonged to God.

Application: Your family is not your own. Your children are not your own. God has given you family and children for a reason. He wants you to be a good steward. He wants you to raise your children to serve Him. You need to do your part to pray for and train up your children to be disciples of God. For me, the opportunity to make disciples for God is one of the biggest reasons why I wanted to have children. My wife and I often prayed and still pray that God would not give us any children who would not one day trust in Him as their Savior. We don't have children so that we can be taken care of when we are old. We have children so that we can offer them as a sweet gift to our God. That means we shouldn't selfishly hold on to them. We shouldn't discipline them because they hurt our feelings or don't appreciate us. It is not about us. It's about God.

14. Verse 37 – They agreed to tithe of the first they had.

Verses for reading and discussion:

2 Corinthians 9:7 – Each one must give as he has decided in his heart.

Proverbs 11:24 – One gives freely, but grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.

Psalms 4:5 – Offer right sacrifices and put your trust in the Lord.

Why is it important to tithe of the first rather than give what is left? How can we practice that in this day and age?

15. Verse 38-39 – They agreed that the priests would properly handle and use these gifts.

Nehemiah 11-12

Outline

- I. People volunteer to live in Jerusalem (11)
- II. The list of priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel (12:1-26)
- III. The wall is dedicated (12:27-47)

- I. People volunteer to live in Jerusalem (11)

Discussion Questions

- Why did they want more people living in Jerusalem?
- What method did they use to decide it?
- In addition to those chosen through lots, who else lived in Jerusalem?
- What can we learn from them about volunteering?

Teaching Points

1. The city had just been completed. But there was a problem. There weren't enough people to live in it. A lack of people meant that the city was still vulnerable. By creating a strong capital city, this could help unite the people and create a common meeting point to celebrate festivals, offer sacrifices, hold assemblies, etc.
2. Some were chosen by lots – Casting lots was popular in the Old Testament. They believed that God would divinely ordain the results to bring about His will.
3. Others volunteered – We see in verse 2 that many people volunteered for this. For some that meant making sacrifices. They would be leaving their homes, their farms, and their neighbors to settle in a city. Not everyone likes living in a big capital city. Sometimes serving God and others requires sacrifice.

Application: We don't need to wait to be chosen to do a task. Instead we can take initiative and volunteer to do what needs to be done. Let us all learn from them and have a “Here am I, send me” attitude.

III. The wall is dedicated (12:27-47)

Discussion Questions

- What was the purpose of dedicating the wall?
- Who joined the dedication?
- What did they do at the dedication?
- Why did the Levites need to purify themselves?
- How can we purify ourselves today?
- What was the purpose of the choirs? What can we learn from this about worship?
- What is happening in verses 31-39? (A praise walk) Can we do similar things today? Like what?
- Where did the praise walk end?
- What happened at the conclusion of the day?
- What was the attitude of the people? Why were they so joyful? Where did this joy come from? How did they express their joy?
- What can we learn from this?
- Why did men need to be appointed for this task (44)?
- What was their job?
- What was the job of the priests and Levites?
- What do we learn from verse 46 about the importance of thanksgiving and praise?
- What can we learn from this passage about what unity is (does it mean everyone is doing the same thing?) What positive effects can we see in these verses from unity?

Verses on Joy

Romans 15:13 – May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1 Peter 1:8 – Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

Romans 14:17 – For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Proverbs 10:28 – The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.

Psalms 16:11 – You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Verses on Praise

Hebrews 13:15 – Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

Psalms 69:30 – I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving.

Isaiah 43:21 – The people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.

Verses on Unity

Colossians 3:14 – And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Romans 15:6 – So that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Psalms 133:1 – How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

Teaching Points

1. The wall was dedicated – When they finished the task of building the wall, they decided to hold a dedication for the wall. When you dedicate something you commit this person or thing to God's service and make a commitment to use it for God's glory rather than your own. Dedicating a child means making a commitment that you will do your best to raise this child up to serve the Lord rather than for your own selfish reasons. Dedicating a house means that you plan to use this house as a place to serve the Lord. You pray that it will be a place of hospitality, a place of blessings for those who visit. Dedicating the wall was their way of saying that the newly built Jerusalem belonged to God. He could do with it and with them what He wanted. They were committing to serving God in this place. They were also praising God for His favor in finishing this task.

2. It was a celebration – The people were happy. God had favored them in allowing them to get this far. He had favored them in causing their return to the Promised Land, in allowing the rebuilding of the temple, and the rebuilding of the city walls. This was a time for gladness, rejoicing, and thanksgiving.

Application: What kind of things can you celebrate with other believers? When we are following God's will, there are a lot of reasons to celebrate. In the past couple of years I have been able to witness several weddings between brothers and sisters. A godly marriage is a great reason for celebration.

When we do well, there is a reason to celebrate. Let us live our lives in the light. Let us have a pure conscience in front of God and man so that we can celebrate God's blessings in our lives together. We can celebrate when people come to the Lord. We can celebrate marriages. We can celebrate birth. We can celebrate the beginning of new fellowships and new churches. Are you living your life in a way that you want to celebrate or in a way that you want to hide?

3. The priests and Levites purified themselves – Leading God's people is an important responsibility. One doesn't have to be perfect. We can't be anyway. But leaders must be an example to the people. They must take their role seriously. This includes hating sin. It means that they should be quick to confess their sins so that there will be no wall between themselves and God or themselves and the people they are serving.

Application: How can we purify ourselves? (See 1 John 1:9. We can't actually take away our sins. Only God can truly cleanse us.) For me, one clear application is to confess my sins prior to teaching others God's Word. I should confess my sins before preaching a sermon, leading a Bible study, or even teaching my children the Word.

4. They also purified the people – Before the people could really come to God in celebration they had to deal with their sins. In the Old Testament washing with water was an external picture of the work that only can do in washing away sins and that would be perfectly done by Christ on the cross. It's a picture of washing away our spiritual dirt much like taking a shower is washing away physical dirt. This ritual would serve to remind the people about their own dirtiness in God's sight. See Isaiah 64:6. The sacrifices and washings of the Old Testament were a constant reminder that the people needed help. It was a constant reminder of the seriousness of sin. And it was an ever present picture of what Christ would ultimately do on the cross to once and for all take the punishment for our sins.

5. Verses 31-39 – In these verses we see a “praise walk.” Some of you might be familiar with “prayer walks.” Have you ever been part of one? A prayer walk is when a believer or group of believers walk through an area and pray for the people or problems there as they go. The praise walk here in Nehemiah is similar. The group starts together on one section of the wall. One group goes right and the other group goes left. As they go they sing songs of praise to God.

It was so loud that verse 43 tells us the sound was heard far away. They continue walking in a circle around the wall until presumably they meet on the other side and then together go to the temple to finish the praise walk together there. Why walk on the wall? Why not just praise God individually from the comfort of their own homes or perhaps as a group from the comfort of their normal meeting place? What was the benefit of actually walking on the wall and doing it as a group? What ideas can you get from this about how to improve your own prayer/praise life? See verses on praise above.

6. They offered great sacrifices – Worshiping God leads to sacrifice. When you worship God you realize how great He is. Naturally you will want to serve Him. You will want to offer Him what you can. What link do you see between worship and sacrifice in Romans 12:1?

7. They rejoiced because God had given them great joy – Where does joy come from? How can one get

it? Why did they have it? Why do some believers now have joy and others do not? What should you do if you want to have joy? Here are just a few things that will bring us joy. Perhaps you can think of more. See also cross-references.

- Obeying God. Genesis 4:7.
- Praying with the right attitude – John 16:24.
- Witnessing God changing people's lives – Luke 15:7.
- Looking forward to what God has in store for us – Hebrews 12:2.
- Giving to others – Acts 20:35
- Trusting in God's promises – Matthew 6.
- Sin will rob us of joy.

8. Joy can be infectious – Your joy can be contagious. Don't be a spreader of doom and gloom. Let the joy of Christ reign in your hearts. As others see that, they will want it too. Your smiling, laughing, and singing can spread.

9. Verses 44-47 – In these verses we see a real picture of unity. Unity does not equal everybody doing the same thing. Instead unity occurs when each person faithfully fulfills the role/function God has given him with a common goal. What different roles do you see being performed in these verses? What is the common goal of the people? What is the result of the unity we see here? Discuss together. See also the above cross-references on unity.

Nehemiah 13:1-14

I. Foreigners excluded from Israel (1-3)

Discussion Questions

- On what day did the events happen recorded in verse 1?
- Why did God not allow Moabites or Ammonites to be admitted into the assembly of God?
- What were the dangers or risks of disobeying this command?
- What major character in this book is an Ammonite? What light can this shed on the reasons for this ban?

Cross-References

Deuteronomy 23:3-5 – No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim[a] to pronounce a curse on you. However, the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you.

Deuteronomy 10:18 – He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.

Ruth 1:16 – But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”

Teaching Points

1. No Ammonite or Moabite should enter the assembly of God – In Genesis 12:3, God promised to Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.” Here is one fulfillment of this promise. The Moabites and Ammonites refused to help the Israelites or even allow them to pass through their own lands when the Israelites entered the Promised Land. These countries had declared enmity against the people of God.

Where following God is concerned, there is no middle road. You are either for him or against him. These nations had declared that they were against God. Therefore their people were not part of the covenant. They were not to be considered part of the family. Most of the Ammonites and Moabites were idol worshipers. Allowing them to mix with Jewish believers would be allowing a potential temptation and snare right in their midst. Would a church allow cult members to roam freely among the congregation? See Ezra 4:3.

The command here is also similar to the New Testament command not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. We will see in the following verses that Tobiah himself was an Ammonite that had opposed God's work. And yet the people were not only allowing him to live together with him, but giving him a luxury suite for free! There is something wrong with that picture.

2. This is not an example of racial prejudice – In Deuteronomy 10:18 we learn that God loves all people. In 2 Peter 3:9, we learn that God desires all to come to repentance. The command here is not an example of God saying, “you cannot become a believer in me if you are from the following countries.” Rather it is an example of God giving them a choice. They had to choose one or the other and could not try to walk the middle and pretend to be a believer in God while refusing to renounce their own sinful lifestyles. Even in the Old Testament the way to God was open to all. Ruth was a Moabitess. But we learn in Ruth 1:16 that she gave up her people and gods in order to become a Jew and follow Naomi back to Jerusalem. She married Boaz and there is never any indication in the Bible that this was wrong even though she was a foreigner. Actually this story is a clear picture that anyone who turns to the Lord is welcome as a believer no matter their heritage. Ruth was the ancestor of both David and Jesus. Rahab is a similar case.

Application: The principle here gives us a two-fold application. Firstly, we should not tolerate the sinful things of the world. We must get rid of ungodly influences. Secondly, we should not try to walk the line in the middle when it comes to serving God. We cannot love both God and the world. We must make a choice. “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”

3. The people obey – To their credit when they are reminded of this law, the people obey. They didn't make excuse or claim that this command was given long ago in a different time. Instead they simply obeyed. When you are reminded of some principle that you are not obeying, what will you do?

II. The people regress while Nehemiah is absent (4-14)

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think Nehemiah returned to Babylon?
- What happened while he was away?
- What do you think is the relationship (if any) of Nehemiah's absence combined with the people's sinful behavior?
- What can we learn from this about people's character?
- What can we learn from this about their relationship with God?
- What can we learn from this about leadership?
- How can we avoid similar types of mistakes?
- Why was Nehemiah so upset that Tobiah had a room in the temple?
- What can learn from his reaction?
- In chapter 10, the people promise to provide for the Levites. Why do you think they didn't keep this promise? Were they intentionally lying?
- What is your opinion of Nehemiah's prayer in verse 14?

Cross-References

Nehemiah 4:3 – Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!”

Nehemiah 4:7 – But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem’s walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry.

Numbers 30:2 – When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.

Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 –When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it.

Teaching Points

1. Nehemiah kept his word to return to Persia – In verse 6 we learn that Nehemiah had left Jerusalem for a period of time. The events of this chapter happen 12 years after the events of chapter 1 (found by comparing the year of Artaxerxes' reign). We don't know exactly when Nehemiah returned to Persia or how long he stayed there. It happened some time after the wall was rebuilt and the spiritual revivals mentioned in chapters 9-12. Back in chapter 2 he had told the king how long he would stay there. So he went to Jerusalem with both sides understanding it was for a specific period of time after which he would go back to continue his duties. Here in chapter 13 he was back in Jerusalem after an extended absence (the two-way journey itself would take around 8 months.) Nehemiah had made a deal with the king and he kept it.

2. The people regress – In the past several chapters we have seen some amazing revivals. The people were eager to learn God's word. Obedience radically changed their lives, both individually and as a nation. But something happened and they regress. Backsliding is shown in almost every area they had made progress in including: separation from foreigners and ungodly influences, respecting the Sabbath day, and providing for the Levites. What can we learn from this?

We can see the importance of a strong, motivated, spiritual leader. It seems that Nehemiah was largely behind these changes. Though there was revival, it was short-lived because the people did not sustain it

on their own. It seems that their obedience was caused in part by the external pressure of Nehemiah “forcing” or at least strongly encouraging them to obey God's law. When he left, this external force keeping them accountable was removed and they were once again free to indulge themselves. In today's world, we can often see this happening as well. One of the clearest examples is children who grow up in believing families. When they are young, they go to church every week, memorize Scripture, join service projects, etc. Yet when they graduate high school, many disappear. What happened? What happened to their relationship with Christ? It would seem that they didn't have any. They did those things because of parental influence and not because of their own heart desire to follow after God.

Application: How can we avoid similar mistakes? How can we keep serving God over the long-term? We need to start by evaluating ourselves and our motivations. We need to consider why we go to church, study the Bible, or go to fellowship. Is it because of some external factor? If so, then our motivation is not pure and when that external factor is removed our lack of genuine relationship with God will be exposed. Beyond that, we need to develop a stronger and stronger personal relationship with God. There are advantages to Christian fellowship, which is why God established the church. At the same time, we must have the right motivations for serving God. If you make progress, don't get prideful. Don't get complacent. Forget what is behind and push on toward what is ahead.

3. Eliashib gives a special room to Tobiah – Back in Nehemiah 3:1, Eliashib was the high priest. He may or may not have still had that position, but he was clearly a high ranking priest. Eliashib offers a room (which had been used for storing temple supplies) to Tobiah. Here was a man who had actively (even vehemently) opposed God's work in rebuilding the walls. In the ensuing years, he hadn't repented or turned to God. Yet because of his relationship with the Jews through marriage (Nehemiah 6:18), he was given a prime spot to live in the temple. We should remember that Nehemiah himself had been tempted to take temporary refuge in the temple and had steadfastly refused to desecrate this holy place by making use of it for his own purposes.

4. Nehemiah was very displeased – Why was he so displeased? Isn't it good to love your enemies? Doesn't God want us to be compassionate toward unbelievers? We are supposed to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. God wants us to be compassionate, but we should also use wisdom and discretion. Would a shepherd invite a wolf to make his home with the flock of sheep? Would you show a thief your safe combination? Instead of separating from ungodly influences they were inviting them right in! Essentially they were giving the devil a foothold to ensnare them from. Eliashib, as the spiritual leader, should have known better. But he didn't. And there was no one who showed enough discretion or fortitude to confront him on it while Nehemiah was away.

5. Nehemiah acted decisively – He takes action quickly. No one could possibly misunderstand what was happening. He knew what he needed to be done and he did it. Does this remind you of anyone? It is quite similar to Jesus' reaction when the people of his time defiled the temple. This is good leadership. Not only did he solve that immediate problem, but it also put the “fear of God” into those who would violate his commands in the future. His actions could serve as a rallying point for all the people who perhaps knew that they were drifting away from God, but who were too timid or quiet to do anything about it.

Application: When you see spiritual problems around you what will you do? Will you be like Eliashib who blindly welcomes temptation with open arms? Will you be like the people who silently stand by and watch as temptation comes in? Or will you be like Nehemiah? Will you do what needs to be done no matter how unpopular?

6. He gave the order to cleanse the rooms – Before the rooms could be used again for service to God, they had to be cleansed.

7. Nehemiah discovers other problems – Backsliding in one area will lead to backsliding in other areas. Sin cannot be contained. If sin is allowed, it grows and festers and spreads. It will not follow the restrictions you put on it. Sin is like a fungus or mold. Once it is present it keeps spreading and spreading. If you want to get rid of it, you have to get rid of all of it. If you leave any, it will just take over again.

8. The Levites were not being provided for – In chapter 10, the people had committed to giving tithes and offerings and taking care of the Levites and priests so that those could dedicate themselves to fully serving God. But they had gone back on their word. They had broken their contract. I don't think they intended to break their word when they give it, but they did break it nonetheless.

Application: If we are honest with ourselves, we will realize that we do the same things. We make applications. We make commitments. We make promises. For a while we change. We improve. We obey what we know God wants us to do. But then we often fall back into our same habits. What can we do about this?

9. Remember me for this, O my God – We see here an honest and heartfelt prayer. Nehemiah had sacrificed a lot for these people. He had left his stable and comfortable job back in the Persian capital. He had traveled back and forth across vast wildernesses and endured all kinds of opposition while going about the mission God had given him. He had faced enemies outside and enemies inside. He had listened to people mock him. He had stood up against temptation. He had avoided temptations and snares. He had helped to bring about revival for a nation. But he had seen that same nation fall back into the same sins he helped them to escape from. People may or may not have appreciated him. But he had faith that God was watching and would see him through as well as reward him. This was enough. It was this faith that pushed Nehemiah forward, that strengthened him to accomplish near impossible tasks.

Application: God sees everything you do. Don't worry about what people think of you. Don't work for their accolades. Don't desire their appreciation. Your rewards are in heaven. God sees. God will reward. That is more than enough. See Mark 10:29.

Nehemiah 13:15-22

Outline

- I. Sabbath reforms (15-22)
- II. The sin of intermarriage is repeated (23-30)

Discussion Questions

- What motivated the people to break their promise about doing business on the Sabbath?

- What can you do to safeguard against regression and/or going back on commitments that you have made?
- How did Nehemiah react? What can we learn from his reaction?
- Was he too extreme/aggressive in his response to the traders? Why or why not?

Cross-References

Verses on Exposing Evil

Ephesians 5:11-12 – Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.

Psalm 94:16 – Who will rise up for me against the wicked? Who will take a stand for me against evildoers?

James 5:20 – Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Isaiah 5:20 – Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

James 4:4 – You adulterous people,[a] don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

Teaching Points

1. People were breaking the Sabbath – In chapter 10 we saw that the people had made a commitment to honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy. One part of that commitment was to stop doing business on the Sabbath. Here we see that the people regressed in this area. They failed to honor their commitment. It wasn't a lone segment of society either. The sin was widespread and pandemic. It included treading wine presses, transporting goods, importing merchandise, and doing business. It appears that non-Jews were the ones doing a lot of the actual work. So what is the problem? The problem is two-fold:

2. The Jews were basically exploiting what they may have considered to be a loophole in the law. While some of them were not breaking the letter of the law, they were breaking the spirit of the law. For example they might have said something like, “We are not allowed to transport items for selling, but there is no law saying we can't buy from someone who does.” A similar example would be a farmer saying, “I am not working in the field, I am only watching the person I am paying to do the work in the field.” This law should not have been reduced to a list of things they weren't allowed to do. The purpose of the law was to rest from their normal activities for the purpose of honoring God. While going to walk around a busy market may not have expressly broken any laws, it was certainly not what God intended for this day.

Application: We should never look at an issue from the perspective, “The Bible does not say I can't do this, so I will.” That is completely the wrong perspective. We should look further than the letter of the law and consider the spirit of what God intended. We should evaluate our own motives and our own consciences. We should do all to glorify God. When considering whether or not we should do something, what is a better question to ask than the statement, “The Bible does not say I can't do this, so I will?”

They were enabling other people to break God's law. See Exodus 20:8-10.

Consider the logic of their thought process:

- A. It is sin to do work on the Sabbath.
- B. I will not do work on the Sabbath.
- C. But I will pay someone else to do the work for me on the Sabbath.

What is the matter with this thought process?

Application: We should not look the other way while other people sin. Neither should our behavior enable other people to sin. We do not want to cause anyone to stumble. It is not wrong for me to have a drink of wine, but should I encourage a recovering alcoholic to do so? The Bible says it is wrong to take a bribe, but is it wrong to give a bribe? We should evaluate our actions to make sure both that we ourselves are not sinning and that we are not contributing to or enabling someone else to sin. We need to be mutually responsible to help those around us by discouraging them from sin and holding them accountable so that they won't sin.

3. Then I reprimanded the nobles – See cross-references on exposing sin. Nehemiah doesn't turn the other way. He doesn't ignore the problem. He doesn't sweep it under the rug. He doesn't minimize it. He sees a sin problem and he confronts it head on. Neither does he candy-coat it. Instead he calls it “this evil thing” and “profaning the Sabbath.” He is so uncomfortable about the sin, he cannot remain silent. His conscience demands that he speak out. When he does he doesn't beat around the bush.

Application: In the modern world speaking out against sin is not considered virtuous. Tolerance and understanding are instead valued. People who speak out against sin may be labeled as “bigots,” “haters,” or “religious freaks.” Certainly we should care about people's feelings. We shouldn't hurt people's feelings for no reason. We shouldn't say things with the purpose to hurt others. However, we should care about the truth more than we care about people's feelings. We should care about the truth more than we care about people's emotions. If speaking out the truth causes someone to get their feelings hurt, this should not keep us from saying what needs to be said.

4. Verses 19-21 – Nehemiah was not only a good motivational speaker. He was a man of action. He saw a problem. And he took action to deal with it. He commanded that the gates be closed and the traders/merchants not even be allowed in to the city. Many of the traders and merchants did not listen to the new policies that they were not welcome to trade on the Sabbath day. Thinking of the amount of money they could make, they decided to camp outside the walls in hopes this policy would be reversed. Nehemiah stopped this idea quickly by threatening physical force against anyone who camped outside the walls. What do you think of Nehemiah's threat? Was he too extreme? Let's look at the result. It was effective. Verse 21 tells us that “from that time on they did not come on the Sabbath.” We should note that Nehemiah was the governor. He had the authority to command that the gates be shut. And he had authority to threaten (and to use) force on those who didn't listen. He was not overstepping his authority. He was using his authority to glorify God and edify his people.

What can we learn from Nehemiah's reaction to all of these problems? How can we apply what we learned to our own lives?

5. Verse 22 – Nehemiah restores the Levites to their proper positions and shows them how they can start serving God again. Their first task is to serve as gatekeepers to keep the traders and merchants out

on these days. In addition, they are to consecrate this day.

6. Remember me – Nehemiah asks God to remember him for what he had done. This is the same request he makes in verse 14. We ourselves would only want to pray this if we were serving God faithfully. Otherwise we would want God to forget what we had done. Let us ask God to give us the strength to serve Him faithfully, believing and knowing that He will reward us for the things we do for Him while we are on this earth.

IV. The sin of intermarriage is repeated (23-31)

Discussion Questions

- What was the reason they should not marry foreigners?
- How does Nehemiah react?
- Was his reaction too extreme/aggressive? Why or why not?
- What principles can we learn from him? Should we also react to sin like he does?
- What example does Nehemiah give?
- What can we learn from the fact that both he and we today give Solomon as an example of the dangers of marrying an unbeliever?

Cross-References

Deuteronomy 7:3 – Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons.

Teaching Points

1. The people had intermarried and their children couldn't even speak the language of Judah – In the past chapters we have looked at this problem several times. Unfortunately though there were periods of victory and repentance those times of victory were short-lived. Once again the people were falling into this sin. Part of the reason was that Nehemiah was gone. When he was gone no one kept them accountable. We need to make sure someone is keeping us accountable. One result of these intermarriages was that it effected the children as well. Many of these children could not speak the language of Judah. Is it likely that their parents were teaching them to worship and honor Jehovah in foreign languages? Very doubtful. Speaking in foreign languages was one external sign that the children were losing their own culture and following the foreign culture, including giving up worship of the one true God (whose law was written in Hebrew) and worshipping idols.

Application: When someone sins, his sin will effect other people. In few other areas is this as evident as the sin of marrying unbelievers. It is very difficult for a parent to raise his/her children to believe and honor God if his/her spouse does not do so himself. Why is it so difficult?

2. It takes a lot of time to teach someone about God – Both the mom and the dad need to expend a lot of time to raise their children to know God. If one parent does not, then the burden falls completely on the other parent and a lot of times they don't have enough time or commitment to do it well.

It takes a lot of discipline to raise a child correctly – Discipline will be most effective when mother and father agree and support each other. Imagine a case (and it is not hard to imagine as I have heard of many) where the father refuses to discipline his children (or even forbids the wife to do so) and the

wife tries to discipline the child on her own. How will the child view this?

It takes a lot of prayer to raise a child – If only one parent is a believer you lose half the prayer support.

It takes a lot of modeling – If one parent does not believe, it not only robs the child of a good model, but instead gives the child a bad model to follow. “Mommy doesn't go to church or read the Bible. Why should I?”

The unbeliever will generally not only be an absent/neutral party, but will actively teach the child many things that are contrary to the word.

3. Nehemiah contended with them – He cursed them, struck them, and pulled out their hair. Let's open up the table for comments on this. What can we learn from Nehemiah? Was he too extreme? Too violent? Should we do this? Why or why not? If not this, then what should we do?

4. Nehemiah gives Solomon as an example – From this we learn that truth doesn't change. Nehemiah understood the story of Solomon in the same way that we do today. He applied the same principles of interpretation as we should. The lessons and the conclusion from the story of Solomon is the same now as then. The truth of that story did not change in between the time of Solomon and Nehemiah and it hasn't changed from the time of Nehemiah until now. From this we learn that the Bible is not an allegory. We cannot seek to interpret the Bible by starting the question “what does it mean to me?” It doesn't mean different things to different people (or it shouldn't.) It also doesn't mean different things in different times or in different culture. Truth is unchanging. There is only one correct interpretation, only one correction understanding of any given text. There are many applications, but one, unchanging truth.

5. If Solomon fell so can we – Solomon was not immune to the temptations of sin. His wisdom and knowledge and love for God did not prevent him from sinning. Neither are you immune. How can we take steps to guard against going down the path of Solomon? See 1 Peter 5:8.

6. Nehemiah drove away those who disobeyed – He refused to compromise. He didn't just talk the talk; he walked the walk. Nehemiah was an “all in” type of person. He realized that a person either obeys God or He doesn't. And if a person obeys God, he should obey God in every area, not just the convenient areas.

7. Remember them – We have seen that God remembers those who serve Him. We also see that Nehemiah prays that God will remember those who disobey Him. Will He? If a person does not repent God will remember their sins and judge them for it. If their sins caused others to stumble, he will judge them even more severely. The good news is that if a person repents he will remove their sin as far as the “east is from the west.” Psalms 103:12. God sees and knows what you do. Live your life in such a way that God will one day look at you and say, “Well done good and faithful servant.”

8. Then I purified them – Nehemiah is not satisfied with the work that has been done. He is not satisfied with the changes he has helped to instill. He wants to make sure that the right environment is created such that these positive changes will continue forward into the future. With that vision in mind, he appointed duties for all of the priests and Levites. Nehemiah was only one man. It was their job to ensure that a good model was set for the people and to help make sure that these lapses into sin did not happen again.

Closing note:

We hope you have enjoyed this study in Nehemiah and more importantly will obey the things that you have learned. You are invited to view our other online studies at www.studyandobey.com, and there you can also find more e-book study guides. May God bless you and keep you.