

Ezra – Nehemiah



Return and Restoration

The OT books of Ezra and Nehemiah are neglected parts of Scripture, not often listed as favorite passages and rarely taught in church. That is unfortunate, because the books are very valuable and helpful. Like all Scripture, the books are inspired and profitable for our reading and include examples for us to learn from.

This series will examine the high points of the books and seek to extract practical lessons for the church today. As normal, we'll start with an introductory background and overview study.





a–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

Lesson 1: Introduction

Historical Background: God had repeatedly warned Israel of impending doom if they continued their disobedient and rebellious ways (cf. Jer 2:14ff). Eventually, God fulfilled this threat when both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom were defeated and taken into captivity. The southern kingdom of Judah was taken captive by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in three different deportations: 606 BC (nobles taken), 597 BC (prominent people taken), and 586 BC (city destroyed). The prophet Jeremiah said that the exile would last exactly 70 years (cf. Jer 25:11-12; Ezra 1:1). Some years later (539 BC), Babylon fell to the invading Medes and Persians, led by Cyrus the Great. Interestingly, Isaiah had predicted Cyrus' coming about 170 years before this (Isa 44:28). So after 70 years of exile had passed (606-536), some of the Jews (probably around 100,000) sought to return to Jerusalem, restore the worship system, and rebuild the city.¹ Ezra and Nehemiah record this return and restoration, which took about 90 years to unfold.

Date of composition: 430-400 BC

Content: Ezra and Nehemiah describe the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, the restoration of the temple, and the rebuilding of the city. Shortly after the Persian emperor Cyrus defeated the Babylonians (539 BC), he issued a decree giving all the Jews of the Empire the right to return to their homeland. Ezra-Nehemiah describes three waves of returns from Babylon to Israel. About 536 BC, Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest led the first group of people back to Israel. In 458, Ezra led a second group back to Jerusalem. Ezra's main task was to restore the sacrificial worship system. He did this by laying the foundation for the temple and setting up the sacrificial altar.

Why was it so important to re-establish the temple? *Remember the importance of the sacrificial worship system—this was the only approach to God. When the temple was destroyed, they virtually lost their access to God. How could the Jews worship God without the temple and sacrificial system? See 1 Kings 8:33-34 and Dan 6:10.*

About twelve years after the end of the book of Ezra (c. 444), Nehemiah received permission from King Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem. His main task was to rebuild the wall around the city. He and the people were able to accomplish this task amid great opposition in 52 days.

Why was it so important to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem? *At that time, a city without walls was a dangerous place. Few people lived in the city because of the lack of walls. Until the walls were rebuilt, the city could not function as it should.*

Purpose: The narratives were written to encourage the returned Jews to be involved in true temple worship and to remind them to fulfill their covenantal obligations because of God's mercy.² Although they were still under Persian rule, God was fulfilling His promise to reestablish true worship among them.

¹ Many Jews remained in Babylon (e.g., Mordecai and Esther), primarily because they had become prosperous and were satisfied with the conditions there. Under the Babylonians, then the Persians, Jews were granted great freedom and many did well in business. The first banking house in history started with a Jewish family at this time. Fensham, *NICOT, The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*.

² John A. Martin, "Ezra," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton: Victor, 1985), p. 651.

Text: These two books were originally two separate compositions but were combined as one in the earliest Hebrew manuscripts.³ The Septuagint (LXX) treats them as a single book, as does Josephus, Jerome, and the Talmud. Later manuscripts divided the two books. Lists of things (temple articles, names of the returned exiles, heads of clans, etc.) are very prominent in these books, and several official documents or letters written in Aramaic are included in the text.

Authorship: Jewish tradition holds that Ezra and Nehemiah wrote the books bearing their names, and the evidence suggests that this is probably true. Much of the books is written from a first-person perspective. The books were compiled from various sources including personal journals, official letters, and government records. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were employed by the Persian Empire and would have had access to the materials and resources necessary to write these books. Other scholars suggest that Ezra was the main author/compiler.

Key Figures:

- Ezra: Godly and patriotic Jew, a priest and scribe (Ez 7:1-6), great student of the Scriptures, a man of prayer (8:21-23) who was burdened for his people (9:3-4). Ezra came to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (458 BC) as the political/religious leader (7:8). He was responsible for reinstituting temple worship.
- Nehemiah: Cupbearer in Artaxerxes' court; later governor of Jerusalem. He came to Jerusalem in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (445 BC). He motivated the people to rebuild the walls.
- Zerubbabel: Political leader of the restored nation; leader of the first group to return; of the Davidic line
- Joshua: The high priest who returned with Zerubbabel
- Cyrus: The Persian ruler (550-530 BC) who freed the Jews to return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon
- Artaxerxes: King of Persia (465-424 BC) who employed Nehemiah and allowed him to oversee the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem

Interpretive Considerations: A primary challenge of dealing with OT narrative literature is finding practical applications to the modern Christian reader. A great disconnect exists between us and the Jews living in the Middle East under OT guidelines 2400 years ago. Our process in discovering meanings and applications must always stem from an understanding of what the text meant to the original readers. Only then can we suggest what it means to us and how we should apply it in our lives. This is one reason we must understand the historical context first.

Ezra-Nehemiah is more than a historical record; it's an account of God's action on behalf of His people. The author wanted to instruct and to edify by telling a story of restoration through Ezra and Nehemiah. He selected certain primary sources and carefully crafted his account in order to illustrate something profound about God and God's restoration of His people.⁴ So this is history,

³ *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 662.

⁴ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *The Preacher's Commentary Series* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 24. Most of the outline in this material is taken from this work.

but it's also theology. There's a moral to the story; it's history presented with a theological purpose.

A common misapplication of Ezra and Nehemiah suggests that just like it was necessary to build walls around Jerusalem, so it is necessary for believers to build "walls" around their lives. These spiritual "walls" might be equated to separation from evil people and evil behavior. While it is true that believers should separate from evil, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are dealing with physical walls, not spiritual ones. When one takes a detail from a narrative and gives it a spiritual meaning that the author of the book did not intend, he is guilty of mishandling the text.

Other Stuff: The Minor Prophets Haggai and Zechariah lived during this time and exhorted the returnees to rebuild the temple. The events of Esther also occurred in Babylon between Ezra 6 and 7. The Book of Malachi was probably written during Nehemiah's time. No other writing prophets arose in Israel after these Prophets until the time of John the Baptist, about 400 years later.

A Basic Outline of Ezra-Nehemiah

- I. Zerubbabel leads the first return and rebuilds temple despite opposition (Ezra 1-6).
- II. Ezra leads a second group to Jerusalem and leads a revival (Ezra 7-10).
- III. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, inspects the walls, and begins rebuilding (Neh 1-3).
- IV. Opposition to the project arises, spiritual revival occurs, and the walls are dedicated (Neh 4-13).

Exciting News from Ezra-Nehemiah

We might be inclined to think that these obscure OT books have little to teach us today, but if that's our attitude, we would be dead wrong. All Scripture is "given by inspiration and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Further, the themes we find here have eternal and practical significance. Plus, it's vital for Christians to understand their spiritual "roots." Ezra-Nehemiah records an important chapter in the life of Israel, and all Christians should be familiar with this history.

I. God is Sovereign

God is the One controlling the action from behind the scenes in these books. God had punished the disobedient Jews for their rebellion, but He was now giving them another opportunity to be faithful. The first verse of Ezra states that the only reason for Cyrus' decree to let the Jews return to Jerusalem was that the Lord "stirred up" his heart. Further, the Jews had to return in keeping with Jeremiah's prophecy that they would be captive in Babylon for 70 years. That time had passed so God fulfilled the prophecy. Both Ezra and Nehemiah recognize God's sovereign hand in all they are trying to accomplish (Ez 7:9; 8:18; Neh 2:8). God moved kings and overcame varied opposition to reestablish Israel as Abraham's seed, nationally and individually, in the land promised to Abraham, David, and Jeremiah.⁵ The overall purpose of Ezra-Nehemiah is to affirm that God works sovereignly through responsible human agents to accomplish His will.⁶ God's sovereignty

⁵ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006).

⁶ *New Geneva Study Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995).

encompasses the entire world, all nations, to assure the continuation of his redemptive plan through the Jewish people.⁷ The Lord not only determines the history of his own people, but also fulfils his will through the mighty kings of foreign nations.⁸

Application: God is actively accomplishing His will in our lives as well.

II. God is faithful to His promises.

God brought judgment upon His people for their sin exactly as He said He would. The Babylonian captivity cured the Jews of idolatry and gave them the desire to know and obey God.⁹ Also, the prophet Jeremiah said that the captivity would last 70 years. This prophecy was correct, and men like Zerubbabel, Joshua, Ezra and Nehemiah had complete faith in God's promise to restore the Jews to Jerusalem. Further, God fulfilled his prophecy that a man named Cyrus would issue the decree to allow the Jews to return.

Application: We can trust God and His Word. He will do exactly as He said He would. Prophecies will be literally fulfilled.

III. The servants of God often face opposition.

Several forces in and around Jerusalem tried repeatedly to stop the work of rebuilding, and were successful in stopping the work for 15 years. Three men, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, were intent on preventing the work from progressing. They ridiculed and threatened the workers and conspired together with others to sabotage the work. They attempted to get Nehemiah to compromise, and when that didn't work they threatened his life. Also, the Jews were squabbling among themselves. Some were oppressing others through high taxes and unfair labor practices. But Ezra and Nehemiah persevered through all the trouble and were successful in completing their tasks.

Application: Those who serve God often experience great opposition. Those attempting great things for God should be ready for this attack. Problems may even arise from within the ranks of those who should be supporting the work. Recognize the spiritual nature of such resistance. Don't quit just because people oppose or ridicule you.

IV. Everything rises and falls with Leadership

Both Ezra and Nehemiah were instrumental in motivating the people to do the work of rebuilding the temple and the city walls. When Nehemiah temporarily left Jerusalem to return to Babylon, the people soon fell into sin without his strong leadership. When he returned, he again led the people to confess and forsake their sin. Further, although both Ezra and Nehemiah faced difficulties and opposition, they did not become discouraged or quit the work. They pressed on to the conclusion of their tasks. They also fully relied upon God to sustain and protect both themselves and their projects.

Application: We can learn much about leadership from the lives of these two men.

The rebuilding of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem was a direct result of strong leadership. Someone must stand up and lead the way.

Leaders must have a vision, a plan for what they want to do. Nehemiah had a plan which he submitted to God's providence and to the king's approval (Neh 2:1-8). He

⁷ Mervin Breneman, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1993), 51.

⁸ Fensham, *NICOT*, 19.

⁹ Warren Wiersbe, *Expository Outlines of the OT*, p. 195.

planned the work and worked the plan. Planning and organization are important aspects of leadership.

People often serve God only as their leaders motivate them to do so. A lack of godly leadership is often disastrous. Once the leader is off the scene the people revert to evil ways in many cases.

Opposition and strife are common in God's service and should not hinder one from serving God (cf. Neh 4:1-4, 7-8). In fact, those who are most effective in God's service often experience the most opposition.

Leaders must rely upon God for strength to finish the task (cf. Neh 4:4-5). We see both of these men praying frequently and trusting in God to fulfill His promises.

Leaders must not be afraid to confront people about their sin (cf. Ez 10:10-11). Ezra and Nehemiah didn't seem to be concerned about their popularity among the people.

They were more concerned about pleasing God. Leaders may need to make decisions that are not popular but are necessary.

V. Believers should revere and appreciate God's Word.

Ezra-Nehemiah affirms the centrality of the Law (the Torah, or the first five books of the OT) of God in the life of the community.¹⁰ As Ezra read the Law, the people responded by worshipping God, weeping, and confessing their sin (Neh 8:1-6). Many of these Israelites had not heard the Scriptures read or preached for many years, or perhaps never. Most of them did not even understand Hebrew, so Ezra and others translated the Word into Aramaic, which is what they likely spoke.

Application: Don't develop a hard-heartedness or an apathetic attitude to the Bible. Allow it to stir your heart as you read and hear it.

VI. Believers must pursue religious and ethical purity.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah attempted to keep the Jewish community pure from the negative influences of the neighbors who surrounded it (Ezra 10; Neh 13:23, 27). The temptation to succumb to pagan religion and rituals was strong, and many of the Jews had intermarried with non-Jews. Ezra and Nehemiah compelled the Jews to put away (i.e., divorce) their foreign wives and devote themselves to the proper worship of God. Also, Nehemiah refused to let non-Jews help with the building of the walls, for he knew that their intention was really to hinder the work. He even threw one man (Tobiah) out of a chamber in the temple area because he didn't belong there (Neh 13:8).

Application: The separation Ezra and Nehemiah insisted upon was both racial and spiritual. In the NT dispensation, we know that ethnic distinctions no longer matter. Spiritually speaking, though, we are to separate ourselves from false teachers, false doctrine, and even disobedient believers. We are to "come out from among them and be separate" (2 Cor 6:14-18). We should not cooperate with those who are faulty in their beliefs or practices. We should also be separate from the things in the world that are hostile to Christianity (1 John 2:15-17).

Conclusion: Ezra and Nehemiah present the modern reader with many timeless principles of godly leadership and service. Seek to follow the examples of these two great men.

¹⁰ Breneman, *NAC*, 52.



Ezra–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

Part I: Restoration of the Temple (1:1–6:22)

Lesson 2: God Begins to Restore Through Cyrus

The first part of Ezra-Nehemiah is a narration of the return of the Jews to Judah and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem after its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BC. When the Medes and Persians defeated the Babylonians (539 BC), they took over administration of Israel and that region.

Our story begins in 538 BC when Cyrus, king of Persia, issued a royal decree calling for the rebuilding of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The temple (often called the Second Temple) was completed and dedicated in 516 or 515 BC. During these intervening years, the Jews struggled to complete the task amidst great opposition and personal discouragement.

The theme of restoration ties the diverse elements of this section together. In the pattern of Ezra-Nehemiah, physical restoration (of the temple) occurs before spiritual restoration (through Ezra). But, as the story will show, even rebuilding the temple required the providence and intervention of God.¹¹

I. The Proclamation of Cyrus (1:1–4)

- A. The Persian ruler Cyrus defeated the Babylonian Empire, which included Judah, in 539 BC. Before that, Cyrus ruled a small region in what is now Iran. The Persian Empire expanded greatly under Cyrus's wise administration. In contrast with previous emperors, Cyrus initiated a policy of sending conquered people back to their homelands. He also restored religious articles the Babylonians took and rebuilt the temples that had been destroyed. He probably did this to gain favor for himself both from his subjects and also from their "gods."
- B. Cyrus did not do this of his own accord. The prophet Isaiah records God's words claiming Cyrus as "His anointed" (read Isa 45:1, 13). Ezra credits God with stirring up the spirit of Cyrus to fulfill the prophecy Jeremiah had spoken (Jer 2:11-12, 29:10).
- C. Cyrus ordered the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and allowed the displaced Jews to return to the city (Ezra 1:2-3) He even encouraged the Jews who stayed in Babylon to financially support the project.
- D. Cyrus was a polytheist who believed in regional gods with limited powers. He worshipped a variety of gods and did not affirm the sovereignty of the one true God. Still, God used him to accomplish His purposes for His people.

¹¹ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *The Preacher's Commentary Series* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 37.

II. Response to the Proclamation (1:5–11)

- A. The heads of fathers' households would have been tribal leaders. Judah and Benjamin were the two main tribes deported to Babylon. Each tribe was divided into families and households. The chiefs of the tribes "rose up" to return home.
- B. The priests and Levites were those in charge of conducting the business of the temple. Even after seventy years of exile, they still clung to these responsibilities.
- C. The Jews returned to Judah because God's Spirit had "moved" them (.5). God is the author of this restoration. He stirred up Cyrus to proclaim the Jews' freedom and He motivated the people to return.
- D. Note that many people strengthened the hands of those leaving Babylon for Judah (.6), probably meaning that the Gentiles contributed to the project. This is somewhat reminiscent of the Jews' exodus from Egypt (Ex 12:35-36). Unfortunately, many Jews ignored the opportunity to return and stayed in Babylon.
- E. It was common custom at that time for a conquering nation to take the religious artifacts of a defeated people back to the temples of the conqueror's "gods." This is what Nebuchadnezzar had done (2 Chron 36:18). Cyrus sent all the treasures that the Babylonians had taken from Judah back with the Jews. The temple building would be new, but the vessels would provide a sense of continuity to their history.
- F. Sheshbazzar (.8) is a somewhat mysterious figure, mentioned several times in Ezra, but unknown beyond that (another person with the same name is recorded in 1 Chr 3:18). He's a "prince of Judah," with some kind of standing or authority. He was among the first group of Jews to return to Jerusalem to reconstruct the temple (Ez 5:16).

What happened to the Ark of the Covenant?

It is not mentioned here among all the treasures taken back to Jerusalem, which seems odd if it still existed. It seems most likely that the Ark was destroyed in the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The Jewish historian Josephus claims that there was no Ark in the Second Temple or in Herod's Temple. Jewish legend held that the Ark was hidden and would surface at some future time. John sees the Ark in the heavenly temple in his vision (Rev 11:19), but that doesn't mean that it survived the Babylonian captivity. Perhaps it still exists, buried in a cave or languishing in a museum warehouse, awaiting a swashbuckling "raider" to find it.

- G. Verse 11 does not state who was responsible for bringing the Jews up from Babylon to Jerusalem, but the implication is that God was responsible. Read Jer 29:14.

Interesting Notes: For many years, liberal Bible scholars cast doubt on the veracity of the record of Cyrus's decree to free the Jews. Today, a great deal of archaeological evidence supports the facts as given in Ezra-Nehemiah. The authenticity of these records is beyond doubt.

Israel is unique among nations in that it reconstituted itself after its capital city and political and religious systems were destroyed and its people taken into captivity. One of the main reasons most of the Jews maintained their identity as a separate people during the seventy years of exile was the expectation that God would again "visit" His people

and allow them to return to the Promised Land. Without this hope, it is doubtful that the Jewish state would have ever been reborn.

Practical Principles:

- God is clearly orchestrating historical events on behalf of His people. Even pagan rulers and empires bow to His will. God is sovereign over all human history, not just the Jews. National affairs are within God's control. Yet God accomplishes His will through human instruments—Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Sheshbazzar, etc. Our worldview should reflect the fact that God is the Author of history.
- God fulfills His word. God promised to Jeremiah that the Babylonian captivity would last seventy years and that's exactly what happened.¹²
- Following God's will may require great sacrifice, hardship and faith. After many years of stability and relative prosperity in Babylon, the Jews experienced great insecurity and suffering as they returned to Judah and began to rebuild. Following God's will may require the same of us.
- God's work requires faith, preparation, and organization. Imagine the plans necessary to transport thousands of people from Babylon to Judah, settle them in cities, and start rebuilding! It was a monumental feat of organization and administration.
- It's God's prerogative to "stir up" human hearts, both godly believers and wicked unbelievers. God has direct access to hearts and minds.

III. The People Who Returned to Jerusalem (2:1–70)

A. Introduction to the List (2:1–2)

1. This list records those who were taken captive by the Babylonians, survived for seventy years, and returned to Judah. The list is important because it shows the continuation of God's covenant with His people. God was still at work among the Jews; He had not abandoned them. The same list is given in Nehemiah 7:6–73, with some variations.¹³ Lists like this established land rights, security, and legitimacy for those returning.
2. Verse two is the first mention of Zerubbabel. He was a grandson of King Jehoiachin (I Chr 3:16–19), who was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. (II Kgs 24:11–16); hence an heir to the throne of Judah. Zerubbabel was born in Babylon; his name means "seed of Babel." He was the civil leader or governor of the Jews who worked to rebuild the temple. He also restored both the courses of the priests and Levites (Ezr 6:18) and the provision for their maintenance (Neh 12:47). Nothing is known of him after the completion of the temple; nor is there any record of his death.¹⁴
3. Jeshua (called Joshua in Haggai and Zechariah) was high priest. He was the grandson of the last high priest before the exile. The Nehemiah

¹² Biblical scholars debate when the seventy years started and ended. The first deportation occurred in 606 BC, and seventy years later would be 536, which is when many Jews were returning to Judah.

¹³ There are some significant differences between the two lists. The numbering system used at the time was rather awkward and easily miscopied by scribes.

¹⁴ R. Laird Harris, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, electronic ed., 250 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999, c1980).

mentioned here is not the same one who wrote the book bearing that name. Mordecai is not the same one from the book of Esther.

B. The List of People (2:3–63)

Genealogies figure prominently in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The knowledge of relationships was highly regarded in ancient times, and it is important in many societies today.¹⁵ This list spells out groups of people in the following categories:¹⁶

- 2:3–20 Lay people (according to their ancestry)
- 2:21–35 Lay people (according to their ancestral home town)
- 2:36–39 Priests (according to ancestry)
- 2:40 Levites (according to ancestry)
- 2:41 Singers (according to ancestry)
- 2:42 Gatekeepers (according to ancestry)
- 2:43–58 Servants: Nethinim (sanctuary servants or gatekeepers) and Solomon's servants (according to ancestry). Levites assisted the priests and the Nethinim assisted the Levites.
- 2:59–63 Those who could not demonstrate their ancestry

This list reveals some important details about Jewish community life at the time, most notably, the centrality of the temple. Priests, Levites and temple workers receive special attention. The Jews must have kept accurate, detailed records of these positions throughout their captivity—quite a feat given the circumstances. The list also shows the value they put on such records. Anyone not able to prove his genealogy was excluded from the priesthood (.62). A pure line had religious significance because foreign influence could bring apostasy into the community. Priests especially had to be able to prove themselves to be of true Jewish descent.

The Urim and Thummim (.63), objects kept in the breastplate of the high priest, were used for divining God's will. In the Pentateuch they are associated with Levi (Deut 33:8), Aaron (Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8; cf. Ecclus 45:10), and Eleazar (Num 27:21). The Urim and Thummim were probably two small objects made of wood, bone, or stone, perhaps of different colors or with different inscriptions, that would give a yes or no answer. The high priest would reach into his breastplate, extract the objects, and do something with them to determine the answer to a question.¹⁷

C. Conclusion to the List (2:64–70)

1. The whole congregation consisted of 42,360 people (.64). However, if you add up the list just given, the total is 29,818 (Nehemiah gives 31,089). The “whole congregation” would have included women and children, whereas

¹⁵ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. An archaeologist tells a story of listening to a Middle Eastern Arab recount his family genealogy back forty generations.

¹⁶ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary*, 57.

¹⁷ *Expositor's*.

the earlier list probably did not include them. Other factors may have also contributed to the differences we find in the record.¹⁸

2. Those returning from the captivity “gave after their ability” to support the reconstruction efforts of the temple. The “dram” (.69 KJV) is the same as the Persian daric or the Greek drachma, the equivalent of a day’s wage. This would have amounted to roughly 1,100 lbs. of gold. A mina of silver weighed about 1.2 lbs., an amount one could earn in five years of labor. The total silver given was about 3 tons.¹⁹
3. The people spread out throughout the region, not only in Jerusalem (.70).

Practical Principles:

- We should be glad that our inclusion or recognition in the church is not based on our ability to trace our lineage to anyone in particular. All ethnic distinctions are done away with in Christ. Membership in the Body of Christ is based on faith, not ancestry. Contrary to the OT Jews in this case, we should not include or exclude anyone because of his family background—or education, finances, talents, etc.
- Exclusion from church fellowship is at times biblical and proper. Sometimes we do need to draw lines that keep people from sharing in Christian fellowship. We may also prevent some from serving in the church who are not qualified to do so. Some have no rights to minister or to lead.
- Spiritual leadership carries high qualifications and demands. We don’t use Urim and Thummim to determine who should be pastor, but we should demand that pastors have the proper qualifications to exercise authority.
- The whole congregation should give “after their ability” to support the work of the church. The work of the church depends on the sacrificial giving of its members and friends. God provides for His work to continue through the generous gifts of His people.

Ps 126:1-3 When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The LORD hath done great things for them. The LORD hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad.

¹⁸ The Hebrew numbering system is quite awkward. Translating from the original Aramaic to Hebrew may be responsible for some of the difficulties with the numbers in the book. Also, scribes can easily make mistakes when copying numbers. Perhaps certain groups were included in the count without being listed in the record.

¹⁹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006).



a–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

art I: Restoration of the Temple (1:1–6:22)

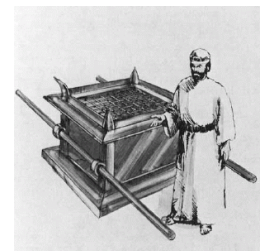
Lesson 3: Building the Foundations amidst opposition (chapters 3-4)

Having returned to Judah from Babylon, the Jews are ready to begin the process of rebuilding the temple and restoring the Levitical worship system. After occupying the region and setting up their households (2:70), the Jews “gathered together as one man to Jerusalem” (3:1) to set up the central altar and start rebuilding the temple.

I. Establishing the Foundations (3:1–13)

A. Laying the Spiritual Foundation (3:1–7)

1. Upon returning to Judah, the first concern of the former captives was the restoration of proper worship. And the first order of business was to rebuild the altar. Building the altar was a high priority because it was the designated way to make atonement for sin, which they hadn’t been able to do for seventy years. In spite of the ruin and destruction of the city and the temple, the people could still worship.
2. The seventh month of the year (Sept-Oct) was a sacred time for the Jews because in it they celebrated the three major annual feast days. On the first of the month was the Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah—New Years), on the tenth of the month was the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur; cf. Lev 16), and on the 15th through the 22nd was the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (a.k.a. “Succoth” [the Heb. word for “booth”] cf. Lev 23:23-44; Num 29:1-40).
3. Jeshua the high priest, Zerubbabel the governor, and others “built the altar of the God of Israel.” This would have been the “brazen (bronze) altar” (Ex 38:30) that was used to burn the sacrificial offerings. The fact that they had to build a new one suggests that the original altar (2 Chron 1:5-6) had been destroyed or lost.
4. They set the altar up on a special foundation (“bases” KJV), perhaps a raised platform, and perhaps in the same location where it had been over seventy years before, the same location where Abraham and David had placed altars. However, the foundation of the temple itself was not laid until later (3:6). Building at the temple site occurred sporadically over the next several decades. The people did not wait until they had a completely renovated temple in which to worship.
5. Verse 3 suggests that the Jews were motivated by fear of the Gentiles who had moved into the area when the Jews were deported. Perhaps the Jews thought that restoring the regular burnt offering would afford them God’s protection. They reestablished the pattern of morning and evening sacrifices (Ex 29:38-46; Num 28:1-8). Two lambs were offered every day, one at 9 a.m. and one at 3 p.m.



6. The Torah repeatedly explains the procedures for celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles/Booths (Ex 23:16; 34:32; Lev 23:33-36, 39-43; Num 19:12-38; Deut 16:13-17).
 7. This Second Temple was a significant building, but it was much less opulent and imposing than was Solomon's Temple (cf. .12).
- B. Laying the Material Foundation (3:8–13)
1. Seven months later, Levites between the ages of twenty and fifty were appointed to “set forward the work of the house of the Lord” (.8). They were clearly attempting to continue the same traditions given by Moses and David. David in particular organized in great detail the work of the various temple workers (cf. 1 Chr 24-25; 2 Chr 29:25-30). Levites were responsible to assist the priests and to take care of the temple and its contents.²⁰
 2. The builders laid the foundation for the temple, but their work at this point was partial at best (see 5:16). The land is still desolate, the temple unfinished, and the city in ruins. Still, they paused to celebrate the fact that the temple was being rebuilt.
 3. .11 “he is good...” This phrase was first used by David in 1 Chr 16:34, 41. Later it was incorporated into the Psalms: 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29; and 136:1. It was used by Solomon in his dedication of the temple in 2 Chr 5:13 and 7:3. Part of it occurs in a Levitical praise text spoken before King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chr 20:21.²¹
 4. By referring to God's “mercy,” the people were affirming God's covenant love and fidelity to His promises. The important Hebrew word can be translated “steadfast love” or “loving faithfulness.” It emphasizes God's faithful care for Israel.
 5. Many of the priests and Levites had survived the captivity to return to Jerusalem, and they “wept with a loud voice” upon the laying of the foundation of the Second Temple. Perhaps people wept as they compared this modest new building to the opulent original that had been destroyed (see Hag 2:3). It was a noisy event with all the shouting and weeping going on.

Practical Principles:

- Worship is always a top priority for God's people. We must worship according to the pattern given us in the Bible, “as it is written” (.4). Large, imposing, ornate facilities are not required to worship God properly. External conditions don't matter when your heart is given to worship. Even in inconvenient and dangerous circumstances, God's people always gather to worship.
- Unity in the faith and in work (3:1, 9) is a wonderful thing that the NT commends repeatedly. Even in difficult times, Christians should unify to worship God and

²⁰ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary*

²¹ Bob Utley www.BibleLessonsIntl.com

accomplish His will. Cooperation and organization among like-minded believers are crucial for success.

- Leadership is critical, both religious and civil. Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel the governor motivated the people to reestablish proper worship.
- Fear should not keep us from obedience. Courage is not lack of fear; it is the will to act in spite of fear.²²
- Those who love God will be generous in supporting the work of the ministry. The work of God continues only when God's people are willing to sacrifice.
- Be thankful that the OT sacrificial system has been done away with in Christ, the final, perfect sacrifice (read Heb 9:26).
- We must find ways in the church and in our personal lives to grieve over losses without becoming mired in the past.²³ Be careful that sorrow or nostalgia does not overcome the work God calls us to do. We must push on despite the limitations of the work.

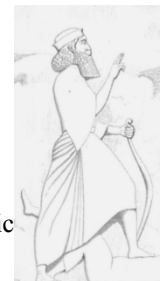
II. Opposition to Restoration (4:1–24)

Everything seems to be progressing according to plan. The Jews have returned to Judah, the worship system has become functional, and the foundations of the temple are being laid. As the people pause to rejoice and thank God, trouble is just around the bend.

Reality—hostility, conflict, discouragement—now sets in.

A. The Opposition Begins (4:1–5)

1. The “adversaries of Judah and Benjamin” would have been those people who were imported into the region after the Jews were deported. These people mixed with the remaining Jews and others in the region and later became known as Samaritans. They supposedly wanted to help with the construction of the temple. They even claimed to worship the same God (2). In truth, those people worshipped a variety of “gods” (read 2 Kings 17:24, 29, 33–34). The Levitical worship system ceased to function when the temple was destroyed, so any sacrifices would have been improper.²⁴
2. The Jewish leaders refused the offer.²⁵ They knew the dangers of allowing outsiders to help. The hostility of the supposed helpers soon became obvious as they “weakened the hands” of the workers and stirred up more opposition to the rebuilding efforts. They likely bribed the Persian officials to hinder the work. Perhaps they were able to stop the flow of materials and workers.
3. This opposition, obstruction, and harassment continued for 16 years, until Darius became the Persian emperor (he reigned 522–486).²⁶



²² Mervin Breneman, vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1993), 91.

²³ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary*

²⁴ It seems likely that the Samaritans had been sacrificing on an altar on the temple site and that the returning Jews destroyed this altar and built a new one. If so, it's easy to understand the antagonism that developed between the two groups. This conflict between Jews and Samaritans continued through NT times.

²⁵ The Hebrew is literally, “not to you and to us.” In other words, “You have nothing in common with us.”

²⁶ Cyrus's reign ended in 530, Cambyses (530–522) followed him, then Darius I (522–486).

B. Other Examples of Opposition (4:6–23)

1. The time frame now skips ahead several decades²⁷ to the time of Ahasuerus, the Persian king better known as Xerxes (486–465 BC), the son of Darius. This material is given as another example of opposition to the work. The letter of complaint to Ahasuerus apparently received no response.
2. The letter to Artaxerxes (464–423), who replaced Xerxes, was more effective. The “Syrian tongue” is Aramaic, the official language of the empire. The people listed (.8-9) were local Persian officials. They call Jerusalem a “rebellious and bad city” which, if rebuilt, will prove to be problematic for the emperor. He would no doubt lose tax income as well as control over the area if the Jews were successful, they claimed. 4:8-6:18 is written in Aramaic since the material is composed mostly of official documents.
3. The enemies’ accusation was based on three claims: (1) they will not pay taxes; (2) they have rebelled in the past; and (3) they will rebel again and remove the region from Persian control.
4. The emperor received the letter and searched for evidence that the Jews had been troublemakers historically. The emperor was convinced that it would be in his best interests to halt the building process in Jerusalem. With the king’s letter in hand, the officials made the Jews stop the work “by force and power.”



C. The Opposition Succeeds (4:24)

1. This verse apparently finishes the thought from 4:4-5. Work on rebuilding the temple stopped. It would not begin again for several years. A sixteen-year gap (ca. 536–520) separates the beginning of the building process from the resumption of it in chapter five.
2. The prophet Haggai tells us why this trouble occurred: the people had put off the building of the temple in order to build themselves “paneled houses” (Hag 1:3-11). They stopped the work when it became difficult. God had chastised them with economic hardship and drought because of their misplaced priorities.

Practical Principles:

- Those who labor in God’s work will encounter opposition and threats. We find many examples of this throughout the Bible. Opponents may try to infiltrate the work to oppose it from within. They claim to be likeminded, friendly, and supportive, but they are “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Discouragement in

²⁷ There is a great deal of uncertainty regarding the chronology of events in this section. It appears that the description starting with 4:6 pertains to a similar occasion years later when the building process was hindered. 4:24 returns to the story where 4:5 left off. Thus, 4:6-23 is a parenthesis to show the real attitude of those who deceitfully offered to help. The temple was finished by 516 BC, well before Ahasuerus/Xerxes arrives on the scene. This example of opposition shows that hostility to the project did not stop even after the temple was complete.

Christian work can come in many forms, often from within the congregation itself (cf. Acts 20:29-30). As the church stands for righteousness, its opponents will become more vicious in their attacks. Difficulties in the work may be long-term. But God is faithful; He will prevail in the end and His people can count on His presence. Our strength is in the promises of God, not in our own strength. In the face of difficulties, we must continue to work.

- The church must resist the pressure to compromise its convictions and insist that those participating in the ministry must be of like faith and practice. Contrary to culture's emphasis on inclusion and tolerance, Christians must separate from those whose beliefs and practices are unbiblical. One cannot worship the true God and false "gods" at the same time. Doctrinal compromise is sin. Tolerance of false worship in the church would prove disastrous. The fact that someone says "I believe like you do" does not guarantee that he is a true follower of God. We must continually strive to keep the church and the gospel true and pure. Actively stand against enemies of the gospel. There can be no fellowship with unrighteousness (2 Cor 6:14-17).
- Opposition to God's work is often centered in certain hateful individuals who do their best to stop progress (e.g., 4:9). Many people hate God, God's people, and God's work. But behind human opposition lies "our adversary the devil," who is always skulking about trying to "devour" people (1 Pet 5:8). We must "wrestle" against him and those aligned with him (Eph 6:11-12). In such spiritual battles, we must affirm that our weapons are spiritual, not "carnal" (2 Cor 10:3-4). We must rely upon God to bring us victory.



Second Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

Part I: Restoration of the Temple (1:1–6:22)

Lesson 4: Resumption and Celebration (chapters 5-6)

The opposition from the enemies of Israel had prevailed in halting the rebuilding of the temple. The basic worship system could go on because the altar was set up and functioning, but the temple itself was still far from complete. Work had stopped (4:24) because “the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, and hired counselors against them, to frustrate their purpose” (4:4-5). Fear and discouragement prevailed. For sixteen years no work was done on the temple while the people worked on their own homes (Hag 1:4). The wealthy Jews enjoyed luxurious living while the poor suffered the effects of drought and famine (Hag 1:6).

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah urged the people to get back to work, and eventually the work began again. The project first began in 536 BC; it is now 520 BC.

I. Help from God’s Prophets (5:1–2)

- A. Through Haggai God rebuked the people for their inaction and called them to begin again (Hag 1:8). Haggai also encouraged the leaders, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, to be strong and work because God was with them (Hag 2:4). The people responded obediently to the preachers and began the work again.
- B. Through Zechariah God assured His people that the temple would be rebuilt (Zech 1:16-17).
- C. Note that the prophets of God were “with them ... helping them” (Ez 5:2). They did not merely cheer on the workers from the sidelines; they pitched in to help alongside all the others.
- D. This is the last we hear from Zerubbabel, the governor in charge when the captives come back to Jerusalem. He is not mentioned with the other leaders when the temple is completed. Perhaps he died during the building process.

Practical Principles:

- We may find ourselves much like the ancient Jews—opposed, worn out, preoccupied, perhaps unwilling to pursue God’s will. Our hands become heavy and we quit the work God has called us to do. We must recognize this condition as sinful and seek to continue on in the work despite our problems.
- God speaks to His people through His preachers. God’s people need direction from God’s Word. Preachers must “reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim 4:2). The bold proclamation of the Word of God is the solution to fear and discouragement.
- God often works through leadership. Leaders of God’s work must seek the Lord, listen to Him, and respond obediently. Leaders are responsible to call the people to obedience and productive labor.

II. Questions from Officials (5:3–5)

- A. The local Persian officials noticed that the Jews had resumed their efforts to rebuild the temple. They enquired regarding who had given them authorization for this action. It's unclear whether these officials opposed the work or were just making sure that the Jews had the proper permission.
- B. Verse 4 is somewhat cryptic in the KJV. Looking at the Hebrew, the sense seems to be, "Also, accordingly, they [Tatnai, etc.] asked them [the Jews], 'What are the names of the men who are building?'"²⁸ Or perhaps, "Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building."²⁹
- C. The reason the work did not stop at this time was that God's "eye" was watching over the project. God's watchful care over His people is a common theme in the OT (read Ps 33:18-19). God extended His favor and care so that the people could continue the work.

Practical Principles:

- The narrative shows how God continues to sovereignly control the events of history for the benefit of His people. Ezra-Nehemiah constantly reiterates God's providence in the life of his people. The reestablishment of the covenant community was the result of a continuing series of God's providential acts.³⁰
- All believers should want God's watchful "eye" to be upon them. Ps 33:18 states that "the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him." If we want God's blessings, we must fear God. To fear God is to hold Him in awe, to reverence and respect Him, and to obediently seek His will for our lives. Success depends not on our own cleverness or skill but on God's favor. See Ps 34:15 and Zech 4:10.

III. Letter from Tatnai to Darius (5:6–17)

- A. They confirm that the temple is being rebuilt "with great stones and timber" and that the work is progressing quickly (.8).
- B. They rehearse their investigation into the issue and the Jews' explanation (.9-16). The Persian officials do not seem so much opposed to the work as they are concerned that the Jews have permission for it.
- C. They ask the king to verify the Jews' claims and to send a response (.17). Probably four or five months elapse between the sending of the letter and receiving a response from the king. During that time the building continues.
- D. Notes:
1. 5:16 is the last time we hear of Sheshbazzar. Here we find that Sheshbazzar "laid the foundation of the house of God," yet in Ezra 3 he is not mentioned among the leaders who laid the foundation for the altar.
 2. 5:16 also seems to be somewhat of an exaggeration. The temple had not really "been in building" the entire time. No progress had been made on the work for sixteen years.

²⁸ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary*. The first person "we said" does not fit the context. Other early versions (LXX, Syriac, Arabic) have "Then they said..." cf. Ez 5:10.

²⁹ So NASB.

³⁰ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*

Practical Principles:

- Imagine working on a project that the authorities could put a stop to at any time. In many countries, Christians work under the constant threat of governmental intrusion and obstruction. We should be thankful for the freedoms we enjoy.
- The providence of God encompasses human choices, even those of pagan potentates. Although God is sovereign over history, we must recognize that human choices are genuine and affect human events. God uses any number of people and means to accomplish His will. We should rejoice that God would use us to fulfill His plan.

IV. Response of Darius (6:1–12)

- A. Darius commissioned a search of the royal archives to see if the Jews' claims were true, and a scroll was found verifying Cyrus's original decree (.1-5). Achmetha is an Aramaic term for the city usually known as Ecbatana, the capital of the former Median empire. Because of its higher elevation (in modern Iran, about 175 miles southwest of Tehran, 300 miles NE of Babylon), Persian kings often spent summers there.³¹
- B. Darius commanded the Persian officials to allow the work on the temple to continue without opposition. He also decreed that all expenses for the work be paid from the royal treasury (.6-10). He concluded by issuing a warning to those who might dare to alter the edict (.11-12).

V. Completion of the Temple (6:13–15)

- A. The work on the temple came to a speedy conclusion (March 12, 515 BC), seventy-two years after the destruction of Solomon's temple. The Persian officials, satisfied that the Jews had permission to build, complied with Darius's commands to aid the process.
- B. God's will was carried out through the labor of the Jews, the preaching of the prophets, and even the cooperation of the Persian kings and officials. The command of God and the commands of the Persian kings contributed to the success of the venture.
- C. Adar (.15) was the twelfth month of the Jewish year, which approximates our late February and early March. Since the rebuilding effort began again in the second year of Darius (5:24), the project required about four years to complete.³² Twenty-one years elapsed between the laying of the foundation and the completion of the temple.

VI. The People Celebrate the Dedication (6:16–18)

- A. The Jews gathered to celebrate the completion of the temple and to dedicate the building to God.
- B. They offered many sacrifices in thanksgiving to God and to atone for Israel's sin. Most of the meat from the animal sacrifices would have been eaten by the people, not burned up in the sacrifice.
- C. The priests and Levites began their traditional work in the temple and the worship system began to function as it was practiced before the exile.

³¹ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary*

³² Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary*. Solomon's temple stood for just under 400 years. The Second temple lasted for 585 years, being destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

VII. The People Celebrate the Passover (6:19–22)

- A. Passover occurs in the first month of the year (Nisan—Mar/Apr). For the first time in seventy years, the Jews were able to celebrate Passover and the other first-month feasts (Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits) at the temple in Jerusalem. The date would have been April 21, 515 BC. The religious activities of the temple were getting back to normal after a long interruption.
- B. The priests, Levites, and all the people purified themselves and “kept the feast with joy” as they thanked God for allowing them to return to Jerusalem, to reconstitute the worship system, and to rebuild the temple. This celebration likely included converts to Judaism (.21). Nobody who was to be regarded as unclean or impure under the law could attend the celebration, which certainly would have excluded the Samaritans.
- C. Mention of the “king of Assyria” is a bit odd here in that Darius ruled over the Persian Empire. However, the Persian Empire extended over the territory previously controlled by the Assyrians. Here’s a providential turn of events: the Assyrians, long-standing enemies of the Israelites, now are ruled by a king that does the Jews a great favor by allowing them to return home and rebuild the temple.

Practical Principles:

- Purification ought to always precede worship. We can rejoice and be glad in God’s presence only if our sins have been purged. Those holding secret sins cannot worship God properly or joyfully. In fact, God refuses worship from stubborn, hard-hearted, sinful people (read Isa 1:11-15).
- Dedication requires two steps: 1) separating ourselves from the immoral practices of the culture; 2) seeking after “the Lord God of Israel” (.21).
- Celebrating is biblical. Such times are important occasions for fellowship, worship, and bonding. We ought to take time to rejoice in God’s goodness and provision. Such times may include feasting!
- God is able to turn the hearts (6:22) of anyone to do His will (see Prov 21:1). The Lord is supreme, and even the mightiest kings are under His authority. God is the Lord of history.³³

³³ Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*.



Ezra–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

Part 2: Restoration of Covenant Life

Phase One: The Work of Ezra (Ezra 7-10)

Lesson 6: The King Commissions Ezra (chapter 7)

More than fifty years pass between the last verse of Ezra 6 and the beginning of chapter 7. The temple had been completed around 516 B.C., the seventh year of King Darius I of Persia.³⁴ He continued to reign for another thirty years before passing his rule to Xerxes I, who served as king from 486 B.C. to 465 B.C. Artaxerxes I, who followed Xerxes, began to rule in 465 B.C. The action of Ezra 7 takes place in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes, or 458 B.C.

Ezra finally makes his appearance in the book bearing his name in this chapter. Unlike those who rebuilt the temple, Ezra focused on the spiritual aspects of restoration. He labored so that God's people might once again know and obey the Torah, the Law of God revealed through Moses.³⁵

- I. Introduction to Ezra (7:1–10)
 - A. The record of Ezra's family line shows him to be a descendant of Aaron "the chief priest." Aaron was Moses' brother. Genealogies were very important to the Jews. This record shows that Ezra had standing in the nation and was qualified to introduce certain reforms.
 - B. Ezra is described as a "ready scribe in the law of Moses," meaning that he had special training in the OT law. In other words, Ezra was a notable scholar, an expert who studied and taught Scripture. Verse 10 shows that Ezra had studied the law, had committed himself to practice it, and was involved in teaching the OT law to the Jews.
 - C. The text does not tell us how Ezra knew the king or how his request was made, but it seems likely that Ezra had some position in the Persian government that gave him access to the king. He was probably appointed by the Persians to a particular government office and also recognized by the Jews as a great scholar. So he's a man of considerable authority and talent, recognized by both governmental and religious authorities.

³⁴ Distinguish the different Dariuses! Darius the Mede was the son of Xerxes (Ahasuerus) who took over the Babylonian kingdom on the death of Belshazzar (Dan 5:30-31, 6:1, 11:1, c. 538 BC). He seems to have been a viceroy of Cyrus, ruling at the same time. Darius I of Persia (reigned 522-486 BC), the fourth ruler of the Persian empire (Cyrus, Cambyses, Smerdis, Darius) is the one mentioned in Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah. He's often called Darius the Great because he enlarged the Persian empire. He's the one who allowed the Jews to rebuild the temple (Ez 6).

³⁵ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary*

- D. Ezra had apparently requested that the king allow him to return to Jerusalem. His success in gaining approval of the king is attributable to “the hand of the Lord his God upon him.” Many Jews were still living in Babylon at this point, and Ezra convinces some of them to return to Judah with him.
- E. A sizable group of Jews accompanied Ezra on the journey back to Jerusalem. It took this second wave of returnees nearly four months to make the dangerous 800-900 mile trip (averaging 10 miles per day). Ezra arrives in Jerusalem on Aug 4, 458 BC.
- F. Three times in this chapter we find the source of Ezra’s success: God’s hand of blessing was upon him (7:6, 9, 28). Why was God pleased to bless Ezra? Note verse 10, which shows Ezra’s commitment to God and the His law. The phrase translated “prepared his heart” suggests a whole-hearted commitment of oneself to something. We would say, “Ezra committed himself completely to God.”³⁶
1. He committed himself to “seek the law,” that is, to study it.
 2. He committed himself to “do it,” that is, to obey it. Bible study must lead to obedience.
 3. He committed himself “to teach ... statutes and judgments.” He wanted to inform others and encourage them to obey the law as well. He knew that success for the Jews hinged on their obedience to God’s law.
- The key to Ezra’s success: he loved God’s Word and God’s people.
- G. So here we find a picture of the man Ezra. He was a priest-scholar, well-trained in the OT law, a pious man whose goal was to return to Jerusalem to teach God’s law to his countrymen.

Practical Principles:

- Bible knowledge takes serious study and commitment. Laborious study is often the only means of finding the correct understanding of a passage. But not even the most studious scholar will ever come to a complete knowledge of the Bible. Bible study is a life-long task. Do you spend time in Bible study?
- God places people providentially. How can you use your position to further God’s goals?
- Education and training are valuable in the Lord’s work. We should not belittle higher education (as long as it doesn’t contradict the Bible). The church needs experts who dedicate themselves to learning the Scripture and teaching it to others. One’s background and training may qualify him to do great things for God.
- Those with the proper qualifications should consider the ministry. Unfortunately, highly qualified and skilled people—the “best and the brightest”—often pursue secular employment instead of the ministry.
- Knowing the Bible should compel us to obey it and to teach it to others. Those who have the capacity should seek positions as leaders and teachers. But before teaching others, we must insure that we are putting into practice what we know (James 2:11).

³⁶ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary*

- Ultimately, any success we achieve is due to the good hand of God upon us. God is more likely to bless us with success when we follow examples like Ezra. We should always recognize God's providential involvement in our lives.
- Like Ezra, we ought to love God's Word and God's people.

II. Ezra's Commission (7:11–26)

- A. At some point, Ezra must have asked the king for permission to return to Jerusalem. He wanted to help educate the returned Jews and to strengthen the worship system at the temple. The text does not tell us this part of the story.
- B. This part of the passage records, in Aramaic, a copy of the letter king Artaxerxes gave to Ezra. The king authorized him to return to Jerusalem with others who want to return, to "enquire" what the conditions were there, and to carry offerings collected in Babylon to be used at the temple in Jerusalem. He is also authorized to buy whatever materials are necessary for the temple and to set up "magistrates and judges" to teach and enforce the law of Moses in Judah.
- C. This commission is rather surprising since it comes from a pagan dictator. But it seems that Artaxerxes is continuing the policies of previous Persian kings in allowing captives to return to their homelands and to reestablish their worship systems. Artaxerxes contributed generously to the worship in Jerusalem in an effort to obtain God's blessing and avoid His curse (.23). It seems likely that Ezra and other Jews must have had a significant influence on the Persian king. Perhaps Ezra himself helped the king draft this decree. Artaxerxes must have had a high regard for Ezra since he entrusts him with so much treasure and responsibility.

Practical Principles:

- As Proverbs tells us, the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. God is fully capable of directly influencing anyone to accomplish His will.
- Christians should cultivate relationships with those who have the authority to further the work of God. Even pagans can support God's work. As Jesus advises us, "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness" (Lk 16:9).
- Serving in a political or governmental position does not necessarily conflict with serving God. We should appreciate support from the government but not depend upon it. Church-state connections are often dangerous and to be avoided.

III. Ezra's Response to the Commission (7:27–28)

- A. Ezra was delighted with the king's commission and thanked God for motivating the king to allow this turn of events. He recognized that it was only by God's intervention that such a thing could happen.
- B. Ezra set about the task of preparing to return to Jerusalem, focusing on choosing leaders who could share the responsibility.

Practical Principles:

- Thanksgiving should always follow blessing. We should always recognize God's blessing when we receive it.
- As the old saying goes, "Where God guides, He will provide." God will provide the strength and resources for us to do anything He has called us to do.
- God's sovereignty does not negate human responsibility. We can't passively wait for God to do something; we must get involved and actively pursue our goals. We accomplish God's will by planning, organizing, and administering.



Ezra–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

Part 2: Restoration of Covenant Life

Phase One: The Work of Ezra (Ezra 7-10)

Lesson 6: Ezra returns to Jerusalem (chapter 8)

Ezra, the “ready scribe,” had received permission from the king to return to Jerusalem. He had also been given a great deal of treasure and the promise of many resources to be paid from the Persian treasury to support the temple in Jerusalem. The king also commissioned Ezra to appoint magistrates, teach the law, and impose judgment on those who violate the law.

Ezra then began to prepare for the journey by organizing leading Jewish families who wanted to make the trip from Babylon back to Jerusalem. Chapter Eight gives the account of this journey.

I. Those Who Accompany Ezra (8:1–14)

Ezra does not list each person by name but only by family heads. Those who make the trip with Ezra are largely from the same families that returned with Zerubbabel several decades before. The list includes about 1500 people, which suggests that the caravan may have included up to 5000.

Practical Principles:

- It’s wonderful to see whole families dedicated to serving God. Family examples can be very powerful. If one family member is willing to obey God, perhaps others will follow. Step out and do the right thing.

II. Levites and Temple Servants (8:15–20)

- A. The location of Ahava is unknown, but it likely is a spot near the city of Babylon, perhaps an open area along a canal. The travelers camped there for three days as they prepared for the journey.
- B. As Ezra surveyed the crowd, he recognized that no Levites were among them. He knew that Levites were needed to carry on the mundane, manual work of the temple. He gathered a delegation to travel to Casiphia, an unknown city today, and recruit some Levites to return to Jerusalem. They found Sherebiah, “man of understanding,” as well as many others who were willing to make the trip. Over 250 Levites and temple servants (Nethinim), probably with their families, agreed to join Ezra. The Levites and temple servants were needed to carry and care for all the sacred objects and valuable materials the group was taking with them. Ezra knew that only the Levites and temple workers had the credentials to handle these materials. They must have very quickly packed up their goods and prepared for the trip.
- C. Why did the Levites and Nethinim not volunteer to return? The text does not say, but it seems likely that many of them had secure positions in the Babylonian society that they were reluctant to give up. Many more of the temple servant

responded than did the Levites, perhaps suggesting that they were less materialistic or less secure in the culture.

Practical Principles:

- There is much work to be done for God, but few who step forward to do it. The work of God is always lacking workers. Some will get involved if you ask them directly. Others always have excuses for why they can't get involved.
Lu 10:2 [Jesus said,] The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest.
- God is looking for willing volunteers to serve Him. Nobody is going to force you to serve God. We should serve God because we want to. We should respond to the desire that God puts in our hearts to serve Him. We should also respond when others ask us to be involved (when appropriate).
- The time it takes to prepare for a project is time well-spent. Preparation is the key to success.
- Get the right person for the right job. Some people are simply not qualified to serve in particular areas, even if they volunteer. Don't hand off an important job to someone who is not qualified to do it.
- Be willing to serve God on short notice. How would you respond to an invitation to pack up your household and make a four-month trek to a new home, and be ready to go in just a few days? Serving God often requires costly dedication.

III. Seeking God's Protection (8:21–23)

- A. Before starting out, Ezra proclaimed a fast. Note the two purposes:
1. "to afflict [humble] ourselves before our God." He knew the importance of humbly submitting the project to God. Fasting indicates a humble spirit of dependence on God.³⁷
 2. "to seek of him a right way for us." He asked for God's guidance and wisdom for the travelers.
- B. Ezra sought the Lord's special protection because he was trusting that God would guard the group on the journey. Although bandits were common along the road, Ezra had not asked the king for an escort of soldiers to protect the group because he had boldly told the king that God would protect them (.22). The travelers risked their lives and their goods as they journeyed east, and God heard their prayer and protected them so that they arrived in Jerusalem without being troubled by bandits.

Practical Principles:

- We must humbly submit all our projects to God for His approval. Nothing of value will succeed without God's good hand of blessing upon us.
- God's will and teachings are often described as a way or a path (cf. Ps 1:1, 119:105). We need God's guidance to go down the right path and avoid the wrong

³⁷ Breneman, *NAC*

one. We should always be seeking of God “a right way for us.” Unfortunately, people often set their plans and pursue them before thinking about God’s will.

- Fasting and prayer should not be uncommon practices for those seeking God’s blessing. Before beginning a major project, take time to pray and fast. God answers prayer.
- Live consistently with your faith. If you say you trust in God for his blessing and protection, then trust God and don’t rely on the “arm of flesh.”
- Serving God sometimes requires that we risk our lives and our goods as we pursue His will.
- We witness through words and actions. We should not be ashamed or afraid to express our faith to anyone. Make use of opportunities to proclaim the gospel.

Question: What impact does Ezra’s refusal to employ an armed escort have on the modern practice of buying insurance to protect yourself? (Note that when Nehemiah led a group back to Jerusalem, he accepted the protection of a military escort.)

IV. Holy Gifts for the Temple (8:24–30)

- A. Many in Persia, including the king and the remaining Jews, had contributed money and valuable objects for the temple. Ezra acted to insure financial faithfulness. He divided up all the treasures to the hands of the “chief of the priests.” He weighed out the silver, the gold, and the sacred vessels to various priests who were responsible to take care of them during the journey. He weighed the valuables in Babylon before they left and reminded the people that he would weigh them again in Jerusalem when they arrived (.29), thus making sure nothing was lost or stolen. Ironically, Ezra trusted God to protect the caravan from marauding bandits but he did not trust the Levites from pilfering the valuables!
- B. The caravan carried an enormous amount of silver and gold. A “talent” weighed about 75 pounds. Thus, the silver alone weighed over twenty-five tons.³⁸ They no doubt had to use ox carts, donkeys, camels, and other means to transport this heavy load.
- C. Ezra reminded the priests that they were especially dedicated to the Lord, as were all the valuable objects they were carrying, and charged them to “watch” and “keep” them during the trip. This special task required extreme diligence and care.

Practical Principles:

- It is wise for a church to establish financial safeguards and accountability policies to guarantee the proper oversight of the money people contribute to the ministry. Even if this requires extra time and effort, a church must insure that its finances are well-managed. A church has the right to demand integrity in these matters. Ushers should think of themselves as “holy unto the Lord” as they keep and watch over the offerings people contribute to the church.
- The old adage “trust but verify” applies to many aspects of life. Even those you trust should be held accountable, especially in financial matters. Trusting God to

³⁸ Some scholars suggest that the excessive weight of the silver and gold are due to textual corruption in the numbers. However, the king gave generously as did the Jews who stayed in Babylon. History shows that some Jewish families had been engaging in banking by this time, and they could have become very wealthy.

protect your assets does not prohibit other forms of security (e.g., banks, insurance, lawyers, CPA's, etc.). Christians and churches are not immune from greedy people and their shady schemes. Make careful decisions and document things in writing. This is one way to avoid scandals and to ensure faithful, responsible stewardship.

- Our offerings are given to God as an act of worship; they are “holy unto the Lord.” All resources given to the Lord’s work should be considered holy and consecrated to God. Such funds must be faithfully and honestly managed.
- Demand integrity from yourself and from others. Live according to what you claim to believe.
- Leaders today, unlike Ezra and the Levites, often lack trustworthiness. Dishonesty, greed, and self-interest often lead to mismanagement and corruption among those who manage valuable resources. Even among pastors, evangelists, and missionaries, financial impropriety causes the downfall of many. The church needs leaders who are consistently dependable and honest.

V. Arrival in Jerusalem (8:31–36)

- A. The caravan departed from Babylonia after an initial three-day encampment (.15) and another eight-day wait while Levites were gathered. The actual departure was on the twelfth day. The group made a successful and uneventful journey to Jerusalem, covering about 800-900 miles in almost four months (April 19-Aug 4). God had watched over them and prevented any ambushes or other disasters along the way.
- B. Upon arriving at Jerusalem, they rested for three days, and then delivered all the treasures to the temple. Several of the Levites at the temple weighed and cataloged all the objects. This suggests a very careful accounting of all the valuables. Ezra likely had to send a signed copy of this record to the king, which explains his concern for accurate accounting and strict oversight.
- C. The travelers then offered burnt offerings to God, thanking Him for a safe journey and purifying themselves from their associations with the pagans along the way.
- D. Ezra delivered the king’s letters to the Persian officials so they knew what the king had decreed regarding the support of the temple from Persian supplies.
- E. The Persian officials, following Artaxerxes’ instructions, “furthered [aided, supported, helped] the people, and the house of God.” The addition of the valuables was beneficial to the work of the temple.

Practical Principles:

- When a project succeeds, take time to thank God for His good hand of blessing upon you. Worship should come naturally to those who love and serve God, especially when God has been good to them in some special way. In some cases, giving a special offering is an appropriate expression of praise and thanksgiving.
- Let God deal with your enemies (.31). See Ps 34:7.

Question: What can you do to “further” (aid, support) the work of the church? The success of the Lord’s work ought to be a primary goal for every Christian.

Question: Should a church accept government aid?



Ezra–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

Part 2: Restoration of Covenant Life

Phase One: The Work of Ezra (Ezra 7-10)

Lesson 7: Ezra Confronts Jewish Intermarriage (9:1-10:44)

Ezra successfully led a group of about 5000 people from Babylon to Jerusalem. Not long after arriving, Ezra hears about widespread sin among the Jews who had previously returned. Many of them had married pagan wives, and some had produced children with them. How will Ezra respond to this crisis? We find here that spiritual restoration is often a painful process.

I. Ezra's Response to an Alarming Report (9:1–4)

- A. Ezra had hardly settled in (only four months had passed since his arrival) before the leaders of Israel told him that the common people, as well as the priests and Levites, had intermarried with the pagans of the land. Ezra's teaching began having an effect as the people recognized that they had violated the law. This unlawful intermarriage had resulted in idolatry and in mixing Jews with pagans. The uniqueness of Israel as a nation was at risk. God had strictly forbidden the Jews from marrying the pagan Canaanites primarily because of the potential for religious corruption (read Ex 34:16 and Deut 7:1-4). Malachi 2:10-16 indicates that some of the Jews had divorced their wives to marry foreign women. Amazingly, some of the leaders of Judah, who should have known better, had participated in this activity.
- B. Ezra responded to this news with great shock and sorrow, tearing his robe, plucking out his hair, and sitting down astonished (appalled, horrified). These actions were common Jewish responses to death or tragedy. The Jews had suffered seventy years of captivity for their idolatry and immorality, yet returned to those very same behaviors as soon as they got back to Judah. It seemed to Ezra that the people had learned nothing from their punishment and were ripe for further judgment from God.
- C. Many who were also grieved at the spiritual condition of the people gathered around Ezra and sat with him, mourning over the sin of the nation. Those who "trembled at the words of the God of Israel" were the faithful Jews who obeyed the law. They knew that intermarriage was wrong and it grieved them.

Practical Principles:

- Christians should not marry non-Christians. Paul calls such unions an "unequal yoke" (2 Cor 6:14). Unequal yokes are dangerous in that they provide many opportunities for unfaithfulness.
- Following Christ demands that we adopt a lifestyle that is distinct from the corrupt culture surrounding us. Christians should seek to minimize the influence that wicked people have on them (see Ps 106:35). Any commitments we make that compete with our obedience to Christ amounts to unfaithfulness.
- Sin should shock and sadden us. God hates sin and godly people should find it appalling and horrible. We should mourn over the sins of others. It should bother us when professing believers stray from the Lord. The more we respect and obey the

Bible, the more sensitive we will be toward human sin. Woe be unto us when we no longer tremble at the words of the God of Israel. We should never have an “oh well” attitude about sin. Read Jer 6:15.

- Are there any positive biblical examples of foreign women marrying into Jewish families? *Moses’ wife (Num 12:1), Ruth, Rahab* If the foreign spouse was willing to convert to Judaism, intermarriage was tolerated. But when it would involve a compromise of faith or practice, intermarriage with the pagan peoples of Canaan was forbidden.³⁹
- We often ignore the lessons that experience should teach us. God’s hand of chastisement should teach us to forsake sin and live obediently.
- The personal behavior of national leaders influences the conduct of the people. When leaders are immoral, the people tend to imitate them.

II. Ezra’s Prayer of Confession (9:5–15)

- A. After grieving all day (9 am ‘til 3 pm), Ezra assumed a position of humility and began to pray. He acknowledged the current iniquity and guilt of the people as well as their historic and chronic tendency to wander from the Lord. Note how ashamed and embarrassed he was for his people. This same sin had resulted in the nation being overtaken by their enemies, and now the people are at it again. Even though Ezra was not personally guilty, he identified with the community. The nation as a whole had allowed this sin and it is thus liable to God’s judgment (cf. Dan 9:4f; Neh 9:5f).
- B. God had been gracious in allowing a remnant to return to Jerusalem and reestablish the temple and the city, yet the people had forsaken God’s commands to separate themselves from the pagan people of the land. As soon as they enjoyed “a little space” and “a little reviving in our bondage,” the people turned back to their evil ways. God’s anger against them was reasonable. God was righteous and the people were guilty of great sin and deserving of judgment. If they continued on in their immorality, God would wipe them all out. Ezra could do nothing more than throw himself on God’s mercy and plead that God not destroy the people for their sin.
- C. The word translated as “nail” (or “peg” .8) refers to a “tent stake” (we would use the term “foothold”). The peg secured the tent to keep it from blowing away in a strong wind. The use of this term here signifies the hope that what God had established in restoration would not be blown away by Israel’s sin.⁴⁰ The imagery suggests that the nation is barely hanging on.

Practical Principles:

- The proper response to sin is humility, prayer, and confession. Falling to one’s knees and lifting up one’s hands in prayer is perfectly acceptable and biblical behavior at such times.
- Sin has practical results. The farther a believer strays from the Lord, the more discipline God will pour out on him. Many problems in our lives are the direct result of disobedience and rebellion.
- Part of confession is admitting the sin and acknowledging that God is just in His discipline.

³⁹ Breneman, *NAC: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*

⁴⁰ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series*

- We should be careful not to allow our freedom to lead to sin. We should not think that God's grace is a license to sin (see Titus 2:11-14). Grace should motivate us toward obedience (Rom 12:1).

III. A Proposal to Solve the Problem (10:1-8)

- A. The number of people supporting Ezra grew. People began to weep and pray along with him. Ezra's humility and confession sparked a spiritual repentance among the returnees.⁴¹
- B. One of the group, Shechaniah, confessed to Ezra that they had sinned, yet suggested that there was a way to turn away God's judgment: they must divorce ("put away") their foreign wives and the children born to them. The Jews recommended that Ezra take the responsibility for this project and assured him that those who fear God would support him in this. King Artaxerxes had given Ezra authority to enforce the OT law (7:25-26), so he was the logical choice to oversee this matter.
- C. Ezra then forced all the people to publicly swear an oath that they would follow this procedure. He issued a proclamation that all men must gather in Jerusalem on a particular day to sort out this matter. Ezra continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the people.
- D. Forced divorce may seem harsh, but the very life of the community was at stake. The only way to avert God's judgment was radical surgery. Ezra had to take whatever steps were necessary to protect the community from idolatry.

Practical Principles:

- One person can have great influence on others. Sometimes you don't even need to say anything to have an impact. Actions often speak louder than words.
- Wise leaders welcome practical solutions from any source. It's also wise to include many people in discussing the issues and in implementing solutions. Corporate decision making often leads to better decisions, particularly when the issues are complex. Cooperate to resolve problems.
- Drastic sins often call for drastic solutions. Normally, divorce is not a proper way to solve personal problems. God hates divorce (Mal 2:16). But in some cases, divorce is an acceptable solution. The NT teaches that a believer need not divorce an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor 7:12-15). The believing spouse in a mixed marriage should trust God for the conversion of his/her mate. This passage in Ezra should not be used to justify divorce.
- Serious problems often call for strong leadership. Those who have to take the lead in such times should be able to count on others to support them.
- Leaders may have to call for costly and difficult actions in order to resolve problems. Dedication to God requires that we obey the Word even when it is hard.
- Vows and oaths may be appropriate at times. A church covenant is essentially a vow that the members make to live in certain ways.
- Confession and forgiveness occur in a moment, but healing and restoration is often a long, difficult, costly process.

⁴¹ Utley.

IV. National Consensus and Action (10:9–17)

- A. Everyone gathered at the appointed time (early December, during the rainy season), and Ezra strongly rebuked the people for their disobedience (lit. “unfaithfulness”). He urged them to confess their sin to God and to separate themselves from their foreign wives and children. Divorce in this case was clearly God’s will (.11).
- B. Everyone agreed that they would follow Ezra’s command, but urged him to allow the local judges in their cities to be involved in the solution. All the guilty men, along with the local elders and judges, would come to Jerusalem at appointed times to discuss the issues with Ezra and the other leaders. Anyone failing to participate would forfeit all his goods. Only a couple of men were against this plan.
- C. The Jews then did as they had agreed to do. Over the course of the next several months, Ezra and others met to question all the men who had taken foreign wives. Perhaps some of the wives had truly converted to Judaism and were raising their children in the Jewish traditions, while others remained pagan. If the men had previously divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry these foreign wives (cf. Mal 2:10-16), it would have caused problems with inheritance rights. There were 110 cases investigated in 75 days.⁴² The text does not tell us what became of the women and their children.

Practical Principles:

- Spiritual leaders must not shy away from rebuking sinners regarding their guilt. It’s never easy to confront someone over his sin, but it is necessary and biblical to do so at times.
- Deep-seated problems may take a long time to solve. Many people may need to be involved.
- Almost any decision will generate some resistance and discontent. Leaders can’t please all the people all the time. Some people will always oppose plans and projects. Leaders cannot avoid making decisions that affect people’s lives.

V. Those Who Put Away Pagan Wives (10:18–44)

This section lists the names of the men (over 100 of them, including 17 priests and 10 Levites) who had taken pagan wives. Several men from the high priest’s family are mentioned. Priests, Levites, and leaders were all guilty of this sin. They sacrificed a ram as a sin offering.

Practical Principles:

- Positions of authority do not insulate one from temptation or absolve one from guilt. Even those who should be dedicated to God’s service may be involved in sin.
- The process of restoration is often painful. Imagine how the members of the guilty families felt as mothers and children were sent away from their fathers.
- Churches often face crises that demand strong leadership and decisive, united community action.⁴³ During times of adversity, leaders must unify and address problems head-on.

⁴² Utley.

⁴³ Breneman, *NAC: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*



Ezra–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

Part 3: Restoration of the walls of Jerusalem

Lesson 8: Nehemiah's background and preparations to build (Neh 1-2)

The Book of Ezra-Nehemiah continues now with a new focus upon the work of Nehemiah. Ezra came to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes I⁴⁴ (Ezra 7:7, 458 B.C.). Nehemiah 2:1 dates the beginning of Nehemiah's effort in Jerusalem to the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I, or 445 B.C.—thirteen years after Ezra.

The overall structure of Ezra-Nehemiah moves from physical restoration (of the temple), to covenantal restoration (through Ezra), back to physical restoration (of the wall), and finally to covenantal restoration (through Ezra and Nehemiah). The first seven chapters of Nehemiah focus on the second phase of physical restoration: rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. Most of this section reproduces an autobiographical account written by Nehemiah.⁴⁵ The author shows himself to be a man of action and a capable leader from whom we can learn much.

I. Introduction and Background to Nehemiah (chapter 1)

A. Dire Report and Deep Response (1:1–4) (Nov/Dec 446 BC)

1. Nehemiah was a Jew working for the Persian government in the capital city, Shushan (or Susa), which was located east of Babylon about 150 miles. The royal household often spent the winter months there. It is also where Mordecai and Esther lived.
2. Nehemiah's official duties included being the royal cupbearer, a position of honor and privilege. A cupbearer tested the king's food to insure its safety. Being so close to the king, Nehemiah would likely have been a trusted advisor to the royal family and familiar with the activities of the court.
3. Some of Nehemiah's relatives had been to Judah and returned with bad news: the Jews in Jerusalem were in great distress and the walls of the city were broken down and burned.
4. Nehemiah responded to this news with great sorrow. He was profoundly concerned about the disgraceful state of his kinsmen and his home city. He wept, fasted, and prayed for many days.

Nehemiah seemed to be surprised by the news from Jerusalem. But why would he have been so shocked? He would have been well aware that Jerusalem was in ruins; it had been destroyed many years prior to this and never rebuilt. Perhaps he's referring to walls that had been partially rebuilt by the first group of returnees (Ez 4:12) which were subsequently

⁴⁴ History records three Persian kings named Artaxerxes—I, II, and III. Extra-biblical materials confirm that Artaxerxes I ruled from 465 to 423 BC.

⁴⁵ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series*

destroyed by enemies (the text does not say that this occurred). Or maybe he was unaware about how desperate the situation had become for the returnees. In any case, something about the report struck a nerve.

B. Nehemiah's Prayer (1:5–11)

1. This prayer shows Nehemiah to be a man of deep personal faith, obedience, and sensitivity. It reflects his steadfast trust in God and his intimate knowledge of Scripture (cf. Deut 4:25-31, 30:4-5). It's one of the great prayers of the Bible.
2. Nehemiah addressed God with proper reverence and pled for God to be receptive to his prayer. He acknowledged the sin of the Israelites and reminded God of His promise to restore the people when they repent. He reminded the Lord that the Jews were His servants who feared His name. Nehemiah again asked that God would hear his prayer and allow the king to be merciful to him. He obviously had a plan in mind that required permission from the king.

Practical Principles:

- Christians may serve in official capacities in the government. God places believers in places of authority and influence for a purpose.
- There is nothing wrong with showing grief and sorrow. Many biblical characters were open in their expressions of grief (Moses, David, Jesus, Paul). Sadness and weeping are part of life (cf. Ecc 3:4). In particular, it should trouble us when God's work is broken down and in ruins.
- Prayer and fasting are appropriate responses to crises. We should take our grief to God (read Ps 61:1-2). Leaders especially must spend time in prayer. Christians should always spend much time in prayer before launching any new endeavor. All planning should start with prayer. See Prov 16:9.
- Prayer should follow a particular pattern: (1) acknowledge God's character—greatness, sovereignty, faithfulness, and mercy; (2) plead for God to hear your prayer; (3) confess your sins; (4) ask according to God's promises; (5) ask for God's help and blessing.
- Prayer and Scriptural knowledge are two sources of strength when facing trials. God's promises should give us courage to attempt great things for God.
- Leaders should recognize God's sovereignty over their projects, ask God to bless the outcome, and seek God's guidance and will. Prayer and submission to God's will should be the foundation of any pursuit or project.

II. Nehemiah prepares to Rebuild (chapter 2)

A. Nehemiah Secures the King's Blessing (2:1–8)

1. Nehemiah had a plan, but it apparently takes him about four months (Nov/Dec 446 BC – Mar/Apr 445 BC) to prepare himself. He purposefully looked sad before the king, which he had not done before. It's likely that attendants of the king were not allowed to be openly sad in the king's presence. Further, a servant could not initiate a discussion with the king. Appearing to be sad was a risky but brilliant strategy for provoking the

king to talk. The king noticed Nehemiah's sadness and enquired about it—exactly what Nehemiah had hoped would happen.

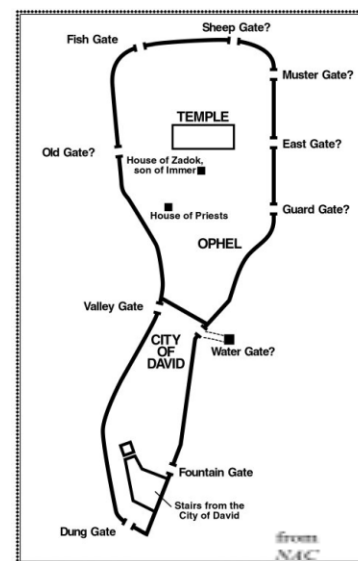
2. Nehemiah fearfully told the king about the source of his sorrow: his home city (Jerusalem) was in ruins. He framed his request in terms the king would sympathize with: a ruined city and abandoned ancestral burial grounds. Nehemiah is very diplomatic with his words. He gains the king's sympathy before revealing any details.⁴⁶
3. When the king asked what Nehemiah had in mind, he presented the king with a plan to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. The king agreed to the plan and even promised to provide the materials for the rebuilding process. Nehemiah was sure to get written permission from the king so that no lesser officials could stand in his way. Letters from the king would insure his safe passage and access to material support.
4. Nehemiah did not credit his own planning and strategizing for gaining the king's permission, but recognized that success was due to God's hand of blessing.

B. First Encounter with the Regional Leaders (2:9–10)

1. Nehemiah did not describe his trip from Babylonia to Jerusalem. We know that he employed a military escort (unlike Ezra). Armed escorts were standard procedure for officials traveling to and from Persia. When he arrived at the city, he presented the king's commission to the Persian officials there.
2. A couple of local officials were hostile to the plan. Sanballat⁴⁷ and Tobiah appear frequently in the book as opponents to the rebuilding project. For some reason, the last thing they desire is that anyone would seek the well-being of the Jews. Perhaps Nehemiah represented a threat to their power.

C. Nehemiah's Secret Survey of the Wall (2:11–16)

1. After settling in, Nehemiah conducted a clandestine reconnoitering of the damage around the city, taking only a few trusted colleagues with him. He had not yet told any of the Jewish officials his plans for rebuilding the city. Nehemiah is a careful, shrewd operator. He wanted to evaluate the situation without drawing attention to himself. He was not yet ready to present the project to the Jewish authorities.
2. The city is in such a state of ruin that he could not traverse certain parts of it. He apparently viewed only the southern part of the walls.



⁴⁶ This same Artaxerxes had already put a stop to the rebuilding in Jerusalem (Ez 4:17-22). To ask the king to reverse this decision was a dangerous strategy.

⁴⁷ Sanballat is mentioned in extra-biblical literature as a governor in Syria in 408 BC.

D. Nehemiah Rallies the Troops (2:17–18)

1. Once Nehemiah had a good grasp on the situation, he revealed his plans to the Jews. He expressed several factors that should have motivated the people to adopt his plan:
 - a) The broken down walls and burned gates were a distressing (bad, troublesome, evil) situation. It was a disgrace (a “reproach”);
 - b) The good hand of God had motivated him to suggest this plan;
 - c) The king had given permission and pledged materials for the project.
 - d) Nehemiah was ready to head up the project.
2. The people agreed to “rise up and build.” They began making preparations for the work.

This short passage shows Nehemiah as a skillful leader: he identified a problem and formulated a solution, he called the people to be involved in the solution, and he motivated them to act by addressing their concerns and interests.⁴⁸

E. First Clash with the Opponents (2:19–20)

1. Several enemies arose in opposition to the project. They heaped scorn on Nehemiah and accused him of inciting rebellion. They knew that Nehemiah had permission from the king, so they could do little but try to undermine the project and dishearten the people through ridicule.
2. Nehemiah trusted God to prosper the rebuilding efforts and accused the opponents of having no business in the project.

Practical Principles:

- Nehemiah's example is full of wise management strategies: Use the proper channels to pursue your goals. Make sure to get permission from the higher authorities. Plan the work and then work the plan. Take time to strategize and present your project with carefully chosen words. Show respect for those in authority. Time your approach carefully. Gather information and formulate a reasonable plan before making an appeal to the authorities.
- Quick prayers (2:4b) are biblical. So are long ones. For those who pray as a normal course of life, breathing a quick prayer should come naturally. In Nehemiah's case, this quick prayer was the culmination of months of prayer.
- Expect hostility and opposition. Don't assume that everyone will support your ideas. When the enemies of God's work can find no legitimate basis for opposition, they may use ridicule, questioning the significance of your labors.
- Trust God to give success. Pay no attention to criticism from those who have no stake in the project. If God's hand of blessing is on the project, nothing can stop it.

⁴⁸ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series*



Ezra–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

Part 3: Restoration of the walls of Jerusalem

Lesson 9: Building and Defending the Walls (Neh 3-4)

Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem, surveyed the situation, enlisted the support of the Jews, and stood strongly against opposition. Work on the walls was now ready to begin. Chapter three gives a list of those who worked on specific sections of the wall, and chapter four describes how the Jews defended the work against their enemies.

I. The List of Builders and Their Assignments (chapter 3)

- A. Chapter three consists of a list of those who worked on the walls and where they worked, starting with the Sheep Gate in the northwest corner and moving counterclockwise around the city. Such lists are rather tedious reading and seemingly contain little significant meaning for modern readers. However, some of the details contained in the list are interesting and important.
- B. The builders came from various regions of Judah and from different professions, even those who seemingly would have little training or experience with wall-building (e.g., priests, perfumers, goldsmiths, political leaders). Even people living outside the city helped.
- C. Both sexes and all social classes labored on the project. Even spiritual leaders got their hands dirty.
- D. Nehemiah must have been a master organizer. The list shows about forty individual sections of work, including ten gates. Planning, organizing, training, supplying, and overseeing all this activity must have required intense labor from Nehemiah and his co-workers.
- E. Some refused to participate (cf. 5). The leading citizens from Tekoa (a city about 11 miles south of Jerusalem) were not willing to submit to the leadership of Nehemiah (and his associates). Even without their leaders, the common folk from Tekoa repaired two sections of the wall (vv. 5, 27).⁴⁹
- F. City walls were important for military and security reasons, but they also functioned as a means of separating the Jews from their pagan neighbors. Thus, the nation's identification and distinctiveness somewhat depended on the presence of the walls. Their restoration also represented a reversal of the humiliation of defeat and destruction suffered because of Israel's sin (cf. 2:3, 17). Like the restored temple, the rebuilt walls would assure the Jews of God's redemptive presence among them.⁵⁰

Practical Principles:

- God's work on earth is done through people. The work of God happens as God's people work. God's business should be our business. Get busy in God's work!

⁴⁹ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series*.

⁵⁰ Mervin Breneman, *NAC*, vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*.

- It should not surprise us when some people refuse to support church projects. Some don't like to work, while others will not submit to anyone else's leadership.
- Cooperative effort is a key to success. Everyone should be willing to work together to complete the job. "Many hands make light work." Every member should find some place of service. Successful ministries enjoy a cooperative spirit among the members.
- Leaders are responsible to mobilize and empower people to do the work. They also should be directly involved in doing the work themselves. No one is above any kind of work, and no work is so low that any Christian cannot do it.
- Find your part of the "wall" to work on. Joy and fulfillment come from cooperating with others to build up God's work.

II. Defending the Wall and Confronting Enemies (chapter 4)

A. Nehemiah Confronts Mockery (4:1–6)

1. The fact that the Jews began work on the walls enraged Sanballat, who began ridiculing the people and their work. His questions revealed his utter contempt for their labor. He scoffed at the idea that the Jews could actually succeed in their efforts to rebuild the walls.⁵¹
2. Tobiah chimed in with more insults, suggesting that the wall was not strong enough to support the weight of a fox. Interestingly, archaeological investigation has found that the rebuilt walls were about 9 feet thick.
3. Nehemiah prayed that God would hear the reproaches of the foes and turn the insults back upon the heads of those who made them.

Note: Nehemiah's short prayer here might be labeled "imprecatory." Like some of the prayers found in Psalms,⁵² this prayer reflects a desire for God to do harm. Such a prayer does not square well with Jesus' commands to love our enemies. How are we to understand such prayers?

First, the fact that Nehemiah uttered this prayer does not imply that we should, too. Records of such prayers are descriptive, not prescriptive. Second, the opponents were hindering God's work, not merely hurting people's feelings. These opponents made themselves enemies of God by seeking to stop the work. Nehemiah was requesting God's judgment against sin. Third, the prayer expressed Nehemiah's zeal for God's work and God's honor. Fourth, remember that Nehemiah lived long before Jesus told us to love our enemies. He should not be held accountable for NT morality.
4. The work on the wall continued despite the obstacles and hindrances of the enemies. The people kept at the job because they "had a mind to work" (.6).

⁵¹ It might not seem that fire could hurt stones (4:2), but if the blocks were limestone, intense fire would have rendered them useless. Limestone virtually melts when subjected to high enough temperatures.

⁵² Some of the imprecatory Psalms: 5:10; 28:4–5; 31:17–18; 35:4–8; 58:6–11; 59:5, 11–13; 69:22–28; 79:6–7, 12; 83:9–18; 109:6–15; 137:7–9; 139:19–22; 140:9–11. Similar language is found in Jeremiah (Jer 12:3; 17:18; 18:21–23).

Practical Principles:

- The real test of Christian maturity is how one faces crises and reacts to opposition.⁵³ Such pressures should not cause people to quit the work.
- Those who serve God should expect opposition in many forms. Ridicule (psychological warfare, intimidation) is one of the most common. We should recognize the spiritual nature of opposition to God's work (read Eph 6:10-12) and fight that battle spiritually (read Eph 6:13-14 and 2 Cor 10:3-4). We should trust our God to "fight for us" (Neh 4:20).
- Opposition in any form should be met with prayer. Prayer is a primary weapon against spiritual opposition. We should never underestimate the power of this weapon. We must enlist God's help to solve our problems.
- Don't seek personal revenge. God can turn the tables on our opponents. Trust God to mete out justice. Christians are under the new covenant and are admonished to love our enemies and to make it our primary concern to lead a wicked world to faith and forgiveness through the message of the cross. Nevertheless, God's people can ask Him to judge injustice and to thwart the plans of those who would hinder God's work.⁵⁴
- Prayer (spiritual) and preparation (practical) complement one another. Physical preparations do not imply a lack of trust in God, just as trust in God does not rule out practical preparations. Even after making adequate preparations for success, we still must seek God in prayer for His blessing on our endeavors.
- Difficulties should not stop the work from progressing. Keep serving God in spite of all the enemies and problems hindering the work. Trust God for success. Our heart's desire should be to serve God no matter what obstacles get in our way.

B. Nehemiah Confronts the Threat of Attack (4:7–23)

1. Sanballat and his colleagues became increasingly angry that work on the wall was succeeding. They knew that a restored Jerusalem would decrease their influence in the region. They conspired together to bring the work to a stop. Enemies now surrounded Jerusalem: the Samaritans on the north, the Ammonites on the east, the Arabians on the south, and the men of Ashdod on the west.⁵⁵
2. Nehemiah prayed for success and also set a guard to prevent any trouble. He trusted God but also made preparations to repel an attack.
3. Some of the people were becoming discouraged because of the difficulty of the work and the threats of the enemies. The working conditions made labor very tiring. Verse 10 is in the form of a poem or song (a lament). The imagery depicts a worker tottering under the weight of his load and ready to fall at any step.⁵⁶ Nehemiah responded by stationing armed people in strategic places around the wall. The enemies could see that the soldiers were in place to defend the walls, which prevented an attack.

⁵³ Breneman, *NAC*, vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*.

⁵⁴ Breneman, *NAC*, vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*.

⁵⁵ Breneman, *NAC*, vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*.

⁵⁶ *Expositor's*

4. Nehemiah assured the workers that there was no reason to be afraid and encouraged them to be ready to fight if necessary. God would support them if they had to fight. When the enemies found out that the workers were prepared to fight, they backed down and work on the wall resumed at full speed. God had frustrated the plans of the enemies.
5. Nehemiah set up a schedule for the people to either work on the walls or protect those who were working. Workers built the walls with their weapons close at hand. Nehemiah established an alerting system whereby all the workers could respond to a conflict at any point of the wall.
6. The work on the wall proceeded. Nehemiah advised the workers to stay in the city instead of going home each night. They sacrificed common comforts to continue working.⁵⁷ According to Josephus, Nehemiah “made the rounds of the city by night, never tiring either through work or lack of food and sleep, neither of which he took for pleasure but as a necessity.”⁵⁸

Practical Principles:

- We should not be surprised by the intense anger some people have against God’s work. (e.g., sodomites angry over Prop 8 in CA) Intimidation has a long history.
- Those who ridicule God’s work may employ more destructive strategies if mere scorn does not have the desired effect. Threats from hardened enemies should be taken seriously. Respond to threats aggressively. Don’t ignore the problem.
- Prayer is a proper response to threats. Combine prayer and decisive action. Prayer does not rule out human action; the two often work together. Trust God for support and make preparations for success.
- Difficult work is often discouraging, especially when people have worked for extended periods without rest. Leaders should encourage workers by reminding them of God’s presence and of the value of their work.
- Leaders must find innovative solutions to problems.
- Participation in God’s work may require us to sacrifice common comforts, at least temporarily.
- The best way to silence critics is to succeed. When the church works together to complete tasks, it is a good testimony to the community and serves to silence the voice of opponents.

⁵⁷ The last part of verse 23 literally reads “a man his weapon the waters.” The phrase does not appear in the LXX. The original meaning of the text cannot be ascertained with certainty. The KJV follows the Latin Vulgate here. The point is clear: each person kept himself in constant readiness.

⁵⁸ *Expositor’s*



Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

Part 3: Restoration of the walls of Jerusalem

Lesson 10: Internal Conflicts and Personal attacks (Neh 5-7:4)

(Neh

Chapters three through six of Nehemiah relate details concerning the process of rebuilding the walls and the many obstacles, conflicts, and hostilities Nehemiah had to overcome to complete the work. In today's section, we find Nehemiah confronting internal conflict and personal attacks as the work on the wall continues. As if external problems were not enough, now squabbles erupt among the Jews that Nehemiah must address.

I. Nehemiah Confronts Internal Conflict (5:1–19)

A. The People Complain (5:1–5)

1. Many of the returned Jews were experiencing financial crises. A drought had struck,⁵⁹ and the people had to sell their land or borrow money to buy food. Some had even sold their children as indentured servants (cf. Ex 21:2-11; 2 Chr 28:10-11). A child would have to work for a creditor until the debt was paid off. Children could even serve as collateral for a loan. They were also having trouble raising the money to pay the “king’s tribute,” a burdensome property tax based on the value of the land. Those who could not pay might have resorted to “loan sharks” who charged high rates of interest. Those who could not repay the loans were thrown off their property. This complaint was not lodged against foreigners but against Jews who were exploiting their fellow countrymen in the middle of the rebuilding project.
2. Ironically, part of the problem was likely due to the fact that most of the people were working on the walls rather than on their farms. They likely did not earn as much as normal because they had dedicated themselves to completing the walls. Combined with the famine, the lack of income created serious cash flow problems. Some unscrupulous Jews exploited the situation. They saw the misfortune of their brethren as a money-making opportunity. Hence, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.⁶⁰

Practical Principles:

- Internal strife is another strategy that Satan uses to disrupt the unity of the church. If it goes unchecked, such conflict will sap the strength of any project. Often internal discord erupts in the course of major projects, adding to the burden of the work.

⁵⁹ Drought often signaled God’s disapproval and judgment (Isa 51:19; Jer 14:13-18; Amos 4:6).

⁶⁰ *Expositor’s*

- It is entirely appropriate for Christians to speak out against social injustice and to work for reforms.
- Sinners (all of us) are prone to treat others unfairly, often for our own benefit. One of the most damaging evils inherent in the human race since the fall is exploitation (oppression) by one's fellow human beings. The great cry throughout the world in our time is for justice. Unscrupulous people are always waiting to capitalize on the misfortune of others.⁶¹

B. Nehemiah's Response (5:6–13)

1. Nehemiah was very angry about this situation because he understood how dangerous a conflict between social classes could become. He immediately saw the source of the problem: the richer people had been taking advantage of the poor by exacting "usury," i.e., charging high interest rates for loans. The OT law was very clear that Jews must not charge interest on loans among themselves (Ex 22:25; Lev 25:36; Deut 23:19; Ps 15:5). Such rules were designed to prevent the wealthy from exploiting the helplessness of their poor neighbors. Charging unfair interest was only one aspect of the offense. It also included accepting property as security for loans and receiving children as slaves.⁶²
2. Nehemiah called the nobles and officials together in "a great assembly" (.7) and rebuked them for their sinful conduct. How ridiculous and inconsistent it was for those who had purchased the freedom of their brethren to now turn around and enslave them!⁶³ He also mentioned how the enemies of the Jews would mock such injustice. He pointed out the immorality of what they were doing (.9) and demanded that they stop charging interest on loans and return the property they had confiscated. The "hundredth part of the money" amounted to 1 percent per month, or 12 percent yearly. The OT does not prohibit making loans, but does condemn the greed that seeks a profit at the expense of a weak or poor person (Ps 119:36; Isa 56:9-12; 57:17; Jer 6:13; 8:10; 22:13-19; Ezek 22:12-14; 33:31).
3. The leaders agreed to follow Nehemiah's demands to give back the interest and the property they had taken. Nehemiah showed his lack of trust that money lenders would keep their word. He forced them to take an oath and also brought in the priests to witness the agreement.
4. Nehemiah shook out the folds of his robe, symbolically indicating that God would "shake out" (i.e., dispossess, strike with poverty) anyone who did not agree to stop this unjust practice. All the people agreed to follow Nehemiah's commands.

⁶¹ Breneman, *NAC* vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*

⁶² Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 11*

⁶³ Though it was possible to use a poor brother as a bond servant, he was not to be sold as a slave (Lev 25:39-42). The sale of fellow Hebrews as slaves to Gentiles was a particularly callous offense and was always forbidden (Exod 21:8). *Expositor's*.

C. Nehemiah's Sacrifice (5:14–19)

1. Although Nehemiah was an official of the Persian government and had the right to collect taxes from the people, he did not do so “because of the fear of God” (.15). Unlike former governors, he did not demand the food allowance the governor was entitled to have. He didn't want to be seen as abusing his authority. He was sensitive to the financial pressures troubling the people and was not out for personal gain. He was willing to give up what he was legally entitled to in order to serve the people of God. He was more interested in serving others than in gaining wealth and influence for himself. This distinguished him from most of the other governors of that era, who typically fleeced the citizens for their own benefit.
2. Nehemiah also did not buy any land during the construction process. All his hired laborers worked on the wall.
3. Nehemiah also provided food for more than 150 people every day. He apparently paid for this out of his own salary as an official of the Persian government. Perhaps Nehemiah came from a wealthy family and had independent financial resources. In any case, he would rather spend his own money than further burden the people.
4. Nehemiah requested that God would remember him for what he had done for the people.

Practical Principles:

- Church members ought to be particularly concerned about treating one another fairly, especially when transacting business among themselves. Never profit from someone else's misfortune (unless you are an undertaker ☺).
- Serving God often is personally costly. We often must willingly forego our rights for the benefit of others (cf. 1 Cor 9). In particular, we should be willing to sacrifice financially to care for the needy within the church (cf. 1 Jn 3:17). Generosity and humility must prevail in the church.
- Conflict within an organization requires strong leaders to chart the right course. Even if the majority of the group is involved in misdeeds, someone must stand up and demand that things be put right. It takes courage to confront influential members of the community. Serious problems require swift, decisive leadership. Leaders must always trust God and seek God's blessing in prayer.
- Nehemiah's actions here illustrate several principles of how to respond to conflict and complaint:⁶⁴
 1. Listen: Listening is one of the most important and most frequently ignored facets of leadership. To listen takes time and effort. It requires openness to new and even uncomfortable information.
 2. Show Sympathy: Nehemiah got angry when he heard about the situation. Anger can be a valuable force, motivating us to affirmative action. We should use the emotional energy of anger to find solutions to the problem.
 3. Think It Over (.7a): When we face conflict or complaint, and especially when this provokes us to anger, we need to take time to think and to pray.

⁶⁴ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 11*

In these quiet moments we are able to reflect calmly, to get to the root of the problems we face. Make a conscious effort to think before answering.

4. Confront Directly: In contrast to Nehemiah, we often find it easier to avoid direct confrontation. We tell everyone else what is wrong instead of confronting the person or people who is at fault. Yet this clearly contradicts the forthright teaching of Jesus (Mt18:15). Find the root of the problem and deal with it directly.

II. Nehemiah Confronts Personal Attacks (6:1–19)

A. Attempt to Distract and Endanger Nehemiah (6:1–4)

1. Once the enemies of the Jews saw that the walls were being successfully built, they changed their tactics. Instead of directly threatening the work, they tried to entice Nehemiah to leave the project and meet with them, supposedly to talk. In reality, what they planned was murder. Once they had Nehemiah outside the city, they would take his life.
2. The plain of Ono was located about twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem. It was not a safe place to travel. Nehemiah saw through their deception and refused to waste time on a long trip or on meaningless dialog. He correctly discerned the insincerity of his enemies and their evil designs.
3. The enemies persisted in trying to lure Nehemiah out of the city. They knew that the work would probably stop if he were not around to keep the project on track. Their intent was to weaken the hands of the workers. Nehemiah did not allow the enemies to divert him from his purpose.

B. Attempt to Libel Nehemiah (6:5–9)

1. The enemies next sent an “open letter” to Nehemiah, accusing him of attempting to set himself up as king of Jerusalem. They threatened to inform the king about his supposed rebellion. The intent of the letter was clearly to spread rumors and incite division among the Jews. Sanballat knew that the Persians would not tolerate any attempt to undermine their authority.
2. Nehemiah curtly denied the allegations and asserted that the enemies were making the whole thing up. He correctly perceived that the allegations were nothing but another attempt to hinder the work. He prayed for strength to rebut these libelous accusations.

C. Attempt to Disgrace Nehemiah (6:10–14)

1. Shemaiah advised Nehemiah to hide in the temple to prevent an assassination attempt, but Nehemiah refused to cower in fear of his life. He knew that such a response would make him look cowardly. Fear and cowardice reflect a lack of trust in God and would undermine the confidence of the people in his leadership.⁶⁵ Fleeing to the temple would result in sin and an evil report (.13). Nehemiah was not a priest and could not legally enter the inner part of temple building. He quickly perceived that Sanballat and Tobiah had hired Shemaiah to attempt to disgrace him.

⁶⁵ Breneman, *NAC* vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. The meaning of the phrase “who was shut up” is obscure.

The fact that Shemaiah proposed a course of action contrary to God's word revealed him as a false prophet (Mt 24:3-10). Nehemiah did not fall for the ruse.

2. Nehemiah again prayed that God would consider the evil ways of the people who were trying to frighten him.

D. Completion of the Wall (6:15–16)

1. In spite of all the obstacles, the wall was finally finished in September/Oct, 455 BC. The work took only fifty-two days. Little if any fanfare or celebration accompanied the completion of the work. Perhaps the people were exhausted and glad to be finished. They celebrated the remarkable accomplishment later (cf. 12:27).
2. Once the enemies of the Jews saw that the walls were finished, they lost heart and recognized that God had prospered the project. Their attempts to disrupt the effort had failed.

E. Opposition Continues (6:17–19)

Although the walls were finished, opposition did not end. Tobiah had significant influence with some of the Jews because of various family connections. Some of the Jews tried to promote Tobiah and show Nehemiah all his “good deeds.” Tobiah himself tried to intimidate Nehemiah by sending him threatening letters.

F. The Job is Finished (7:1-4)

Nehemiah finished the wall project by hanging the doors in the gates and appointing gatekeepers, singers, and Levites in Jerusalem. He then gave command of the city to his brother Hanani and another man named Hananiah. He also gave them directions regarding the administration of the gates. Few people lived in Jerusalem at this time.

Practical Principles:

- How should we react to slander and gossip? While it may be necessary at times to defend oneself, it is often better to simply ignore rumors if possible. A simple, brief denial may be the best response.
- Remain focused on the task at hand; refuse to be sidetracked. We tend to allow “too many irons in the fire,” which pull us in different directions. Evaluate new opportunities in light of the most important responsibilities. Don’t pile on more tasks unnecessarily. Focus on what’s most important and decline other offers. Don’t let yourself become distracted, especially by those who oppose the work.
- Even supposed “prophets” may be frauds. Be very careful before accepting the advice of anyone claiming to speak for God. So-called prophets for hire are nothing new (John 10:12-13). We must avoid and expose false prophets.
- Serving God is an important task that deserves a high priority in our lives.
- We should reply to our adversaries but resist the temptation to get involved in lengthy arguments which merely waste time and effort. The truth is our chief defense.
- Opponents often use lies, slander and gossip to discredit Christian leaders and undermine their work. Under such attacks, we must commit ourselves to doing right and trust God for the outcome.

- Don't run away from difficult situations. Confront difficulties with boldness and confidence.
- Great works can be accomplished when people cooperate together under good leadership. We must give God credit when plans are fulfilled successfully.



Ezra–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

4: Restoration of Covenant Life, Phase Two:

Ezra and Nehemiah Together (8:1—13:31)

Lesson 11: Understanding the Law and confessing sin (Neh 8-9)

[note: skipping most of chapter 7]

The Book of Nehemiah now changes its focus. After describing the trials and successes of building the walls, the book now starts relating the story of the renewal of the religious life of the Jews in and around Jerusalem. Ezra returns to the scene after an absence of thirteen years and plays a more dominant role than does Nehemiah, who virtually disappears until chapter 12. Spiritual rebuilding now takes a prominent role in the text. The Law and the ordering of spiritual life is the focus.

Note also that the text reflects a change from Nehemiah telling his story (first person—“I did...”) to a narration of events (third person).

I. Renewal Through Understanding and Celebrating the Law

A. Reading and Understanding the Law (8:1–8)

1. These events apparently happened in the seventh month (Sept-Oct), a very important time in the Jewish calendar. The three major feasts (Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles) were held during this time. Shortly after the completion of the wall, the people spontaneously gathered together in an open square in the city and asked Ezra to read the Law to them. He read portions of the OT from morning until midday, and all the people who could understand listened attentively. Both Ezra and the people stood for the entire time (perhaps six hours).
2. At some point a platform was erected, and Ezra and several others gathered to read the Law to the people. The “book” (.5) was a scroll (the book form was not yet in use). The people stood up out of respect for the Scriptures as the Word of God. As they heard the words, the people bowed down and worshipped.
3. Ezra’s colleagues helped the people understand the Law by translating it into the common language (Aramaic). It seems likely that the teachers worked with smaller groups of people. After sojourning in Babylonia for so long, many of the Jews could no longer understand Hebrew very well. Note the emphasis here on *understanding* the Word (vss. 2, 7, 8, 12).

Practical Principles:

- Spiritual revival often comes about when people have a hunger for God’s Word and a desire to obey it. Revival or spiritual reawakening is always related to a renewed interest in Scripture. If your level of spirituality is waning, jump start it with more Bible!
- Reading the Bible should be a valuable and meaningful experience for all believers. We should appreciate the fact that we have the Word in our language

and that it's easily accessible. God's Law enriches our lives and gives us joy. God's Word is to be known and used by all the people, not only the priests and leaders.⁶⁶

- We should appreciate the OT as well as the NT. We may tend to ignore the OT as not primarily for us, but we should remember that "all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition" (1 Cor 10:11). We can learn many lessons from the OT. Read Deut 31:11-13.
- Scholars are beneficial for the church. Study of the original languages is very helpful for correct Bible interpretation. Hard work and study is often required to understand the contents of the Bible. We need teachers to instruct us.
- Part of the pastor's responsibility is to "give the sense" and help people to understand the meaning of the Bible. The primary object of preaching and teaching should be the Word, not other topics. All attenders should seek to understand and apply what the Bible teaches. Understanding requires effort from the listeners. Don't turn off your mind at church. Attend carefully to the teaching of God's Word. Understanding should lead to changes in both attitudes and lifestyles.
- Active participation in worship should be normal. Saying "Amen," lifting up one's hands, and even bowing down may be appropriate at times. Exposition of Scripture should motivate worship. Also, extended worship services should not bother us.

B. The People Respond (8:9–12)

Nehemiah and Ezra had to restrain the people from weeping when they heard the words of the Law. The average Jewish person probably had not had an opportunity to hear the public reading of the Law while they were captives in Babylon. This was a day to rejoice, being the first day of the Feast of Trumpets (Lev 23:23-25; Deut 16:15). The leaders sent the people away to celebrate with one another, encouraging them to exchange gifts and enjoy good food. The people went home and celebrated the fact that they understood the words of the Law.

Practical Principles:

- We should be sensitive to the Word as we hear it. Both weeping (see ch. 9) and celebration are appropriate responses to the Word.
- Understanding the Word should cause joy and motivate us to live godly lives. Don't allow Bible reading or study to become an empty ritual. Read Hosea 6:6.

C. The Feast of Booths (8:13–18)

1. Many of the people had probably gone home, but the chiefs of the clans remained in the city. When Ezra taught them about the Feast of Booths/Tabernacles (cf. Lev 23:34–43), they decided that they should observe the occasion. The purpose of the feast was to remember how the Israelites had journeyed in the wilderness. The people gathered materials and built booths for themselves in various places around the city.

⁶⁶ Breneman, NAC, vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*

Everyone who came back from Babylon participated. It was a time of great joy and celebration.

2. Ezra kept reading the Law publicly throughout the feast. On the last day they held a special assembly.

Practical Principles:

- When we read in the Bible about something we ought to be doing (or not doing), we should respond obediently. Revival comes from a commitment to obedience.
- Family heads (normally fathers) are responsible to lead their families and determine their lifestyles. Read Deut 6:4-9.

II. Renewal Through Confession

A. Description of the Assembly (9:1–5)

1. Only a day after celebrating the Feast of Booths, the Jews again assembled, this time not to celebrate, but to fast and weep as an expression of repentance for sin. Fasting, wearing sackcloth, and throwing dust on one's head were behaviors commonly associated with grief. The Jews separated themselves from their pagan neighbors and confessed their sins.
2. Confession means “to acknowledge one's sins.” But more broadly speaking, it has the sense of “speaking the truth.” The record of the Jews' confession contains both aspects of the word—speaking the truth and admitting sin.
3. Half the day was devoted to reading the Law, confession of sin, and worship. The Levites led the people in prayer.

Practical Principles:

- Certain events call for congregational repentance. Fasting and weeping may be appropriate.
- We should not get mad when worship services go a bit long. Occasionally an extended time of confession and worship is appropriate.

B. The Confession (9:6–37)

1. The prayer begins by affirming God's greatness, His rights as creator and owner of all things, and His sovereign control of all things.
2. The prayer recounts Israelite history from God's selection of Abram to the events of Nehemiah's time. It contrasts the goodness and mercifulness of God with the sin and rebellion of the Jews. The focus of the prayer is much more on God's faithfulness than on the Jews' faithlessness. This text is more of a confession of faith than a confession of sin.
3. The Jews acknowledged that all the tragedy that has befallen them had been because of their own wickedness. They were slaves in their own land because of the sins of themselves, their priests, and their kings. They were reaping what they had sown. God was just in bringing these tragedies upon them. Their only request was that their pitiable condition would “not seem little” in God's sight (.32). They expressed their intent to renew their covenant vows to obey the Law and serve God.

Practical Principles:

- We don't need to ask for anything when we pray. Sometimes simple affirmation of God's person and work and/or confession of sin is all that is needed.
- We must affirm the principle that we reap what we sow. Perhaps some of the difficulties we are experiencing are a direct result of unconfessed sin.
- We should approach God with great reverence and awe. God is holy, and we must approach Him with appropriate humility.
- Congregational confession is proper. At times it's appropriate to confess our faith. Other times we need to confess our sin. Sometimes we do both in the same prayer. Even when we are confessing sin, we should also confess God's mercy, grace, and compassion.
- We must be very honest as we evaluate our own sinful condition before God. Our culture tends to minimize and excuse sin. Churches today often emphasize God's grace and downplay the seriousness of sin. Sin is described as a mistake or a failure, but not as rebellion, wickedness, and evil. Psychologists and sociologists tell us not to feel guilty about sin. We even compare ourselves to others and convince ourselves that we are not so bad. Yet a proper understanding of God's greatness and goodness will give us an honest understanding of our own sinfulness.

Quotes: Only when we see ourselves as we truly are—sinners, lost without God—will our hearts be genuinely open for healing, forgiveness, and profound cleansing. By confessing both who we are and who God is, we lay the groundwork for spiritual restoration.⁶⁷

Since it is the Lord who forgives, forgets, and wipes out sins, let us confess our sins to him in order to obtain pardon. He is the physician; therefore, let us lay bare our wounds to him. It is he who is hurt and offended; from him let us seek peace. He is the discernor of hearts, the one cognizant of all thoughts; let us hasten to pour out our hearts before him. He it is, finally, who calls sinners: let us not delay to come to God himself.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 11*

⁶⁸ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.9, in Roberts.



Ezra–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

4: Restoration of Covenant Life, Phase Two:

Ezra and Nehemiah Together (8:1—13:31)

Lesson 12: Renewal of the Covenant and dedication of the walls (Neh 10-12)

After returning to the land, rebuilding the temple and the walls, and experiencing a time of spiritual revival, the people gathered to reaffirm their commitment to follow the Lord and to obey His Law. They recognized that the calamity that had come upon them was due to their sin. They had confessed their sin and asked for God's help. At the end of chapter 9, the people make a "sure covenant," write down the stipulations of the agreement, and seal it with their signatures.

I. Renewal of the Covenant (chapter 10)

A. Sealing the Covenant (10:1–10:27)

This section is a list of the people who signed the covenant. The word "covenant" in this case is not from the typical Hebrew word for "covenant," but a synonymous term, "firm agreement" or "settled provision" (note that the word is italicized in the KJV). However, the verb translated as "make" is, literally, "to cut," the term usually used with making a covenant.⁶⁹ This agreement is not a new covenant but a renewal of their commitment to live according to the former covenant that God had established with the Jews through Moses. Usually, God makes a covenant with man, and man on occasion renews his loyalty to God's covenant. That seems to be what is happening here.

B. Specific Tenets of the Covenant (10:28–39)

1. Those who had "separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God" (.28) bound themselves to follow the stipulations of this agreement. The contract probably included most of the Jews ("the rest of the people...every one having knowledge and having understanding..."). Separation from the neighboring peoples was important to maintain the distinctive beliefs and ethical principles of the community.⁷⁰ No doubt some refused to sign. Interestingly, Ezra is not mentioned as a signer. However, his family is included among those who signed the document (Ezra's father was Seraiah [.2]).
2. This covenant was a solemn agreement ratified with "a curse, and ... an oath." Contracts at this time often included a list of benefits for those who kept the agreement and punishments for those who disregarded the stipulations of the agreement (cf. Deut 28:22). Those signing it promised to "walk in God's law, ... and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD" (.29). The curses of Deut 27-29 would come into play if someone who signed the covenant disobeyed it. The covenant was instituted by

⁶⁹ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series*

⁷⁰ Breneman, *NAC* vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*

swearing an oath in God's name. If the oath is broken, the curse comes into effect.

3. The term "walk" (.29) is a biblical metaphor for lifestyle faith. God's Word establishes a pathway for His people to follow (e.g., Ps 86:11, 119:105; Prov 6:23).⁷¹ The first step in solving the problems the Jews were encountering was submission to God's Word. By renewing the covenant, they were promising to obey the precepts of the OT Law.
4. Besides stating their general promise to obey the Law, the people stated their intent to uphold specific principles from the Law:
 - a) No intermarriage with their heathen neighbors. Intermarriage was a problem because it usually led to apostasy. Intermarriage had been a major problem among the Jews (cf. Ex 34:12-16; Num 25:1-2; Ezra 10:3) and it would continue to be (Neh 13:23-28).
 - b) No buying or selling on the Sabbath or on holy days. During the captivity, Sabbath Day regulations were mostly ignored in Jerusalem. People living in the region got used to conducting commerce on the Sabbath. The returned Jews put an end to that and reinstituted the Sabbath rest as required by the Law (Ex 20:8-11).
 - c) Observe the seventh-year Sabbath. Every seven years, the Jews were supposed to let their fields lie fallow and allow the poor to glean in their fields (cf. Ex 23:10-11; Lev 25:4-7,20-22).
 - d) Release debts every seventh year. According to the Law, all debts were to be cancelled on the seventh year (cf. Deut 15:1-2; 31:10).
 - e) Support the work of the temple (.32-39)
 - (1) Money and materials for the functioning of the temple
 - (2) Firstfruits brought in. Giving God the first ripened fruit was a way to show God's ownership of the entire harvest. These offerings helped support the priests (Ex 22:29; 23:19; 34:26; Deut 26:1-11; Ezek 44:30).
 - (3) Firstborns dedicated. Each firstborn child would be redeemed by paying five shekels of silver (Ex 13:13). The firstborn of the cattle (cow, sheep, goat) was to be sacrificed (Lev 18:17).
 - (4) Tithes given on corn, wine, oil. Tithes were sacred unto the Lord and belonged to the Levites (Lev 27:30; Num 18:21).
 - (5) Not forsake the house of God. They were promising to provide for all the needs of the temple, including the gatekeepers, Levites, and priests, as well as the sacrificial system and the temple property. Maintaining the temple system bound the Jews to God and to one another.
- C. Why was a renewal of the covenant necessary? The regular function of the religious life of the nation had been interrupted for the seventy years of the captivity. After returning to the land, rebuilding the temple and the city, they felt the need to reaffirm their commitment to their God and to His Law. Also, while the Jews had been away, many other people had been living in Judah, and they had established a different way

⁷¹ Utley

of life. Now that the Jews had returned and reestablished themselves, they wanted to demonstrate their continuing commitment to God's Law, God's house (the temple) and God's city (Jerusalem).

Practical Principles:

- Covenants are biblical. Members of churches normally establish a church covenant that is similar to the covenant mentioned here. Church members bind themselves to one another and agree to obey the Word and to behave in certain ways. Renewal or recommitment to the covenant is appropriate from time to time. Submission to God's Word is the key to success for God's people.
- Christians are under the New Covenant, not the Old one. Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant (Heb 9:15) and his blood initiated a new covenant (1 Cor 11:25). We must regularly recommit ourselves to Christ and His covenant (the NT)—daily through devotions, weekly through congregational worship, monthly through the Lord's Supper, and perhaps at other times. Salvation entails a one-time commitment to Christ, but sanctification requires a continuing experience of renewing and demonstrating our commitment to Christ and His covenant.
- Separation is still required of God's people. We are to separate ourselves from evil influences and corrupt ideas. Yet separation is not isolation. We must be in the world but not of the world. Separate, don't accommodate.
- We must apply the Bible to our particular circumstances. Change seems to be the only constant these days, and we must continually seek to apply the unchanging principles of God's Word to our shifting situations. Eternal biblical standards are always authoritative, and we must apply those standards to current conditions.
- Christians should be dedicated to the ministry of the local church. The resources of the church come from the generous giving of those who attend. The first portion of one's giving should go to the local church. Christians should not neglect their local "house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1Tim 3:15). We ought also to dedicate our children to the Lord.

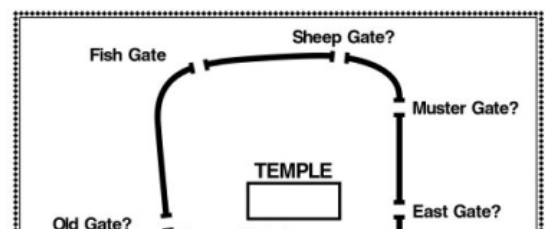
Note: This study will skip over much of the material in chapters 11 and 12. Chapter 11 is a long list of people who lived in Jerusalem and the surrounding cities. The first part of chapter 12 is a list of the priests and Levites who returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel.

II. Dedication of the wall

A. Preparation for Celebration (12:27–30)

1. The walls had been finished for some time (cf. 6:15), but there had been no celebration yet. The time had finally come to celebrate the great achievement. Both Ezra and Nehemiah lead in this celebration.
2. The Levites were brought to Jerusalem to participate in the celebrations, which included music. Cymbals, harps, and lyres were also used when Solomon dedicated the first temple many years before (2 Chron 5:13). The returnees were following that example.
3. The musicians gathered and the priests and Levites purified the people, the gates, and the walls. Religious purification in the OT took various forms, including washings, ritual sprinklings, changing one's garments, sacrifices, and fasting. The text does not tell us how the gates and walls were purified.

B. Dedication of the Wall (12:31–43)



1. Nehemiah appointed two choirs for the dedication ceremony; he led one and Ezra led the other. One of the choirs was stationed on the south side of the city and one on the north. Some of the people carried musical instruments.
 2. These two choirs walked along the top of the walls, Ezra's group moving south toward the temple and Nehemiah's group moving north toward the temple. The two processions converged at the temple, where they sang, offered sacrifices, and rejoiced.
- C. Organizing for Worship (12:44-47)
- The mundane temple tasks, such as gathering and storing the various offerings and the materials for the priests and Levites, was organized. Responsibilities for singers and gatekeepers were also established following the orders that David gave (1 Chron 23-26). Everyone contributed to the temple so the work could go on. Everything was well-organized and the people were satisfied with the situation.⁷²

Practical Principles:

- We must prepare ourselves for participation in worship. In particular, we must seek spiritual cleansing in order to be holy instruments in God's hands. Get rid of those things in life that would defile you so you can serve God without blemish.
- It's better to be a participant than a spectator in worship. Worship is something we do, not something we watch others do.
- Music rightly plays a prominent role in worship. We find many examples of instrumental and vocal music in the Bible, especially in the OT. Singing in particular can unite a group in worship.
- It is appropriate to celebrate achievements. Take time out of your busy schedule to celebrate occasions large and small. A church should also celebrate major milestones. Celebrations unite the community and testify to outsiders. There is nothing wrong with loud, boistrous celebration at times.

⁷² Fensham, *NICOT*



Ezra–Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

4: Restoration of Covenant Life, Phase Two:

Ezra and Nehemiah Together (8:1—13:31)

Lesson 13: Nehemiah's Further Reforms (Neh 13)

We now come to the end of Ezra-Nehemiah. Unfortunately, the book does not end on a positive note. Even after binding themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of Moses (chapter 10), the Jews quickly fell into disobedience by intermarrying with the heathen, allowing corruption and carelessness in the temple, and neglecting the Sabbath (chapter 13). The Jews had been conforming to the world and had ceased trying to live holy lives. Nehemiah had to step in again and institute essential reforms.

I. Separating from Foreigners (13:1-3)

- A. Around the same time⁷³ that the people celebrated the completion of the wall rebuilding project (chapter 12), they listened to the Law of Moses being read publicly. Part of the reading (probably from Deut 23:3-6) included the prohibition of Ammonites and Moabites from participating in the religious life of the nation. Of course, foreigners could be adopted into Israel through conversion (e.g., Rahab, Ruth). But toleration of pagans within their ranks could lead to idolatry.
- B. When the people heard this stipulation from the Law, they separated themselves from everyone who was of mixed ancestry. This probably means that such people could not participate in the religious life of the nation, not that all foreigners were expelled.

Practical Principles:

- Whenever we understand what God wants us to do, we should be willing to do it, even if it is inconvenient or painful. The Bible constantly emphasizes obedience and warns against disobedience.
- We should be thankful that ethnic origins have no significance for Christianity. Everyone is equal before God no matter what his nationality, gender, education, or economic status.
- Separation from sin and from sinful influences is still a significant requirement for Christians.

II. Restoring the Holiness of the Temple (13:4–14)

- A. After serving as governor in Jerusalem for twelve years (445-433), Nehemiah was recalled to the Persian court. He remained in Babylon for an undetermined length of time and then returned to Jerusalem (.6, cf. 2:6).
- B. While Nehemiah was back in Babylon, the people returned to their sinful ways. Eliashib, a priest,⁷⁴ had been given permission to use a storeroom in the temple precincts. He removed the materials for the sacrifices and for the temple workers that

⁷³ The Hebrew phrase “on that day” doesn’t necessarily mean “on the very same day.” “Day” can mean “a period of time.” Verse four suggests that some time had passed before “that day” of verse one.

⁷⁴ The high priest at the time was named Eliashib, but this priest was probably not that same person. However, the high priest must have known about this situation and tolerated it.

had been stored there and allowed the evil Tobiah to move his stuff in. Eliashib was “allied” to Tobiah, meaning that they were somehow related, perhaps by marriage. Tobiah likely used the room in the temple to extend his business and/or political contacts in Jerusalem. Tobiah was a Gentile, an Ammonite, and had no right to be in the temple. His very presence desecrated the room which had been dedicated for holy purposes. This amounts to a serious compromise.

- C. Perhaps the Jews were not expecting Nehemiah to come back and thus became lax in their duties. When Nehemiah discovered what Eliashib had done in his absence, he became very upset and threw all of Tobiah's household possessions out of the storeroom. He gave instructions that the storerooms should be cleansed and that the temple materials should be brought back in. Nehemiah's response to the desecration of the temple was similar to Christ's almost five centuries later (cf. Mt 21:12-13; Jn 2:13-17).⁷⁵
- D. Nehemiah also discovered that the Levites and singers had left the temple to work in their fields. When the temple was functioning properly, these ministers were supported fully by offerings given for their livelihood. But when the tithes were withheld, the Levites and singers could not continue with their sacred tasks. This appears to explain why they had returned to their fields.⁷⁶ The Jews had done precisely what they promised not to do in chapter 10—they had failed to support the work of the temple; they had neglected the house of God. Nehemiah complained to the Jewish leaders and made some changes in the temple administration to address this failure.
- E. The Jews brought their tithes into the storerooms and Nehemiah assigned trustworthy people to oversee the collection and distribution of the temple materials.
- F. Nehemiah expressed his desire that God would remember his work for the temple. In contrast to the other Jews who had forsaken the covenant, Nehemiah had acted faithfully.

Practical Principles:

- Strong and courageous leadership is often needed to restore order. Without godly leadership, corruption and error increase. Leaders often see the dangers involved in behaviors that the majority may be willing to tolerate. Leaders must take steps to counter anything that threatens the purity of religious faith and practice. Proper organization and function of the church is exceedingly important.
- Unbelievers and ungodly people should have no influence in the church. Careless disregard in one area often leads to disobedience in others. Only those who have proven themselves to be faithful should be given responsibilities in the church.
- Oaths, vows, and curses do not guarantee obedience. It's easy to break promises and forget oaths.
- Bold and aggressive responses to error are often required if the group is to survive. We should stand aggressively against actions and behaviors that dishonor God. We must never compromise with evil.
- Ministers of the gospel are entitled to financial support. When God's people begin to compromise, they often stop supporting the work of the ministry.

⁷⁵ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*

⁷⁶ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series*

III. Restoring the Holiness of the Sabbath (13:15–22)

- A. The purpose of the Sabbath was to acknowledge the Lord as the Creator and to honor him for providing one's needs. The Jews should not have been working or buying anything on the Sabbath, nor should they have been allowing the Gentiles to sell their goods on the Sabbath. This was going on throughout Judah and even in Jerusalem, and the Jews were tolerating it. Indifference to Sabbath regulations indicated carelessness about other aspects of God's will. Nehemiah saw that the Jewish authorities were at fault for allowing this neglect to occur, and he was not afraid to rebuke them for their failure.
- B. Nehemiah warned the nobles that God had previously brought calamity on the Jews for the same offense (cf. Jer 17:19–27; Ezek 20:12–24). Once again, the Jews had broken their previous promise (read 10:31). They were in danger of experiencing further punishment from God if they continued to profane the Sabbath.
- C. Nehemiah instructed that the gates of Jerusalem must be shut for the full duration of the Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday sunset). He also positioned some of his assistants around the city so no merchants could enter the city on the Sabbath. Eventually, the merchants learned not to come to the city on the Sabbath. Nehemiah also directed the Levites to purify themselves and guard the gates on the Sabbath. Even guarding the gates was a sacred duty since its purpose was to protect the uniqueness of the Sabbath.
- D. Nehemiah again asks that God would remember him for his faithfulness.

Practical Principles:

- Leaders must be aware of what is happening among the people. They don't tolerate disobedience to clear biblical commands.
- Although Christians are not required to keep the Sabbath like the Jews did, Scriptural principles suggest that Christians should set apart one day in seven for worship and rest. The Lord's Day should be sanctified and special, dedicated to worshipping God and recharging the body.
- Any work done for God is sacred.

IV. Restoring the Holiness of the People (13:23–31)

- A. Intermarriage with foreigners was a persistent problem among the Jews (Ezra 9–10; Neh 6:18; 10:30). Such intermarriage resulted in the half-breed children being unable to speak proper Hebrew.
- B. Nehemiah confronted the offenders, called down a curse on them, and even became violent, striking some and pulling their hair. This may seem overly-aggressive, but Nehemiah had good reason to react as he did. Intermarriage threatened the religious and social survival of Israel. Intermarriage was a clear violation of Scripture and had historically led to idolatry. Nehemiah was more concerned about the welfare of the nation than about the feelings of individuals at this point.
- C. He forced them to take an oath. They had to agree to not marry their daughters to foreign men and not to take foreign women as wives for their sons. Note the resemblance to the oath they had previously taken (see 10:30). Nehemiah reminded them that foreign women were the downfall of Solomon and would be the downfall of them. Marrying foreign women amounted to unfaithfulness to God. Interestingly, Nehemiah did not demand that the Jews divorce their foreign wives as Ezra had required (Ez 9-10).

- D. Nehemiah also banished a grandson of the high priest because he had married into the family of Sanballat, one of Nehemiah's archenemies. This alliance was dangerous because the grandson could have become high priest (cf. Lev 21:14).
- E. Nehemiah again asked God to take note of what the Jews had done.
- F. Nehemiah summarized his reforms: enforcing separation from foreigners, assigning specific duties for the priests and Levites, and providing for the materials needed at the temple.
- G. Nehemiah concluded by asking God to remember him "for good." One gets the sense that Nehemiah is very frustrated with his wayward countrymen. There seems to be little evidence of genuine revival among the Jews even though Nehemiah is able to make them change their ways. The fact that the account ends on a rather inauspicious note displays biblical realism. This is a historical account, not a myth or fable. Nehemiah tells the unvarnished truth.

Practical Principles:

- Family relationships affect one's faith and behavior. Christians should not marry (or date) non-Christians. Unsaved spouses can have a significant negative impact on believers. The decisions of one generation will affect the lives of succeeding generations. Children brought up under mixed-marriage conditions often do not fare well spiritually.
- Aggressive, assertive leadership may be called for at certain times. Desperate times demand decisive action.
- Toleration of evil leads to spiritual stagnation, which leads to indifference on doctrinal matters; the final result is moral and spiritual degeneration.⁷⁷
- We should learn from our past mistakes.
- Leaders must insure that church resources are managed wisely.
- We face continual pressures to compromise with the world in the same areas as did the Jews—marriage and religion. Adultery, divorce, and mixed marriage are common even among professing Christians. Churches are full of corruption and compromise. We are conforming to the world instead of being transformed (Rom 12:1-2). Pagan influences continue to invade and to corrupt God's people.⁷⁸
- No matter what the majority is doing, each of us should be faithful to God's call on our lives. Unfaithfulness in others is no excuse for our disobedience. What matters most in the end is not Nehemiah's achievements, but his character and his relationship with God.⁷⁹
- One committed person can have a significant impact on large numbers of people.
- The Book of Nehemiah begins with prayer and closes with prayer. For lasting results, ministry can never be separated from prayer.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Mervin Breneman, *NAC*, vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*

⁷⁸ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series*

⁷⁹ Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 11, *The Preacher's Commentary Series*

⁸⁰ Mervin Breneman, *NAC*, vol. 10, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*