Nehemiah - Commentaries by Nicolas Simon

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 9:3-38, Confession -

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The children of Israel stood and read in the book of the law for three hours and then confessed and worshipped Jehovah their God (Neh. 9:3). Self-judgment cannot be based on self-assessment. Man, when he measures himself against himself, never comes up especially bad, but when compared against God's standard, how short we fall! "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). We might wonder how they could worship, but self-judgment is not self-judgment if it makes much of self; it must make everything of God.

Special note is taken of the Levites who took the lead in ministering, and they are given by name. Beginning with praise and thanksgiving, they give glory to Jehovah their God before faithfully reviewing God's history with them. This recounting may be broken up in the following manner:

9:6 Jehovah the Creator-God.

9:7-8 God's sovereign call of Abraham and His promises to him.

9:9-12 God's gracious deliverance from Egypt.

9:13-15 The giving of the law and God's provision for the wilderness.

9:16-18 Israel's rebellion in seeking to make a captain to return to Egypt; the golden calf.

9:19-21 God's mercy in not forsaking them in the wilderness.

9:22-25 God gave them kingdoms and subdued the inhabitants of the land of Canaan.

9:26-27 Israel's rebellion; God's government, and the raising up of deliverers.

9:28-30 God's government culminates in their captivity.

9:31 In His mercy, God preserved a remnant of His people.

Three things are especially noted: Israel's failure, God's gracious and merciful dealings with them, and God's righteous government. "But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to Thy commandments. And refused to obey, neither were mindful of Thy wonders that Thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but Thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not" (Neh. 9:16-17). "Thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for Thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly" (Neh. 9:33).

In all, they neither justified themselves nor criticized God. In fact, they owned that God was right and had dealt with them according to their doings. How often confession is spoiled by saying, "but . ... " We can finish this sentence in many ways, all of which involve blaming our circumstances (in other words, God) or other people for our behaviour. We reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7-9). Furthermore, it is not simply what we sow, but the manner in which we sow it. If we sow with jealousy and selfish strife then we cannot expect to reap the fruit of righteousness (James 3:14,18). We like to remind God that He is loving, gracious, and full of mercy, without accepting responsibility for our behaviour — this is neither confession nor repentance. There was, however, a clear desire with the people to change course — though once again, it was based on their own strength: "because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it" (Neh. 9:38).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 9:1-2, A Day of Mourning -

With the feast days accomplished, the people assembled with fasting, clothed in sackcloth and with earth upon them (Neh. 9:1). Three things characterized this gathering: humiliation, separation, and confession. There are two sides to obedience to God's Word: the one we have just seen — rendering unto God those things which are His — but unless we let it become "a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12), then we have not submitted to it at all.

All was done in a state of humility before God. "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God" (James 4:6-7). The word "humility" is often bandied about but without any reality. It is easy to dress in sackcloth and ashes and play the part, and perhaps there were those in this large crowd that did so. However, real humility begins on the inside — it must begin with submission to God. One that speaks of being humble and yet shows a self-centered and independent attitude knows nothing of humility.

Their confession was accompanied by action: they separated from all strangers (Neh. 9:2). Israel was holy in God's sight; they were a sanctified people. The mingling of that holy seed with the people of the lands had been a grief to Ezra some years earlier (Ezra 9:2), and the passing of time had not lessened the need to remain a separated people. Confession alone might have indicated a touched conscience, but without action, it would have been empty words.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 8:13-18, The Feast of Tabernacles -

Not satisfied with just one day feeding on the Word of God, we read that “the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites” (Neh. 8:13) were gathered together for a second day. It is interesting to note that the interest in the Word of God began first with the people. Those whom we would have naturally assumed to be the teachers, especially the priests and Levites, now seek to be instructed. This time we find added the words, “even to gain wisdom as to the words of the law” (Neh. 8:13 JND). Reading for knowledge is a far cry from seeking wisdom. In the book of James we read, “if any one of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5). We cannot, however, expect to receive wisdom from God if we are unwilling to read and meditate on His Word. We do not expect a new revelation from God — we have the completed Word of God in our hands. In prayer, God often answers us from His Word — things that we may have forgotten are brought to our attention by the Holy Spirit. Our chapter ends with “day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God” (Neh. 8:18). Unlike those in Nehemiah’s day, we have ready access to the Holy Scriptures and have no excuse not to be found day by day reading a portion from it.

On this occasion, the people heard from the book of Leviticus: “The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the Lord ... and ye shall rejoice before Jehovah your God seven days” (Lev. 23:34,40). Whereas the Feast of Trumpets typifies the gathering of Israel back to their land, the Feast of Tabernacles pictures them dwelling safely in the land gathered about Jehovah their God. Having gathered the fruits of Canaan (Lev. 23:39; Deut. 16:13), they were to dwell in booths seven days as a memorial to their time dwelling in tents in the wilderness (Lev. 23:42-43). It was a time of thankfulness; the days of harvest were past and they could reflect on all the ways which the Lord had led them: “Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart” (Deut. 8:2).

There is no direct counterpart to the Feast of Tabernacles in Christianity; it remains a future thing in its fulfillment. Conversely, the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of First Fruits, and the Feast of Weeks have clearly had their fulfillment (1 Cor. 5:7; 15:20; Acts 2:14). Nevertheless, we find ourselves in the present possession of a heavenly portion in Christ, and we, too, can reflect with thanksgiving on all the ways in which the Lord has led us.

The people, obedient to the Word of God, made themselves booths to dwell in, and, as a result, “there was very great gladness” (Neh. 8:17). The path of obedience to the Word of God is the happy path; disobedience brings sorrow. Remarkably, not since the days of Joshua had this feast been kept in this fashion, and yet, it is so plainly spelled out in the Scriptures! It may have even seemed rather presumptuous for them to think to do such a thing; nevertheless, God records it for our benefit. One may marvel that the children of Israel had so quickly departed from the Word of God, and yet, the same has occurred in Christianity. The simplicity of the remembrance of the Lord was quickly lost. I do not think it unreasonable to state that it was not until the early part of the 19th century that it was once again carried out in full subjection to the authority of the Word of God — not just in its simplicity, but as the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:20): giving expression to the one and only fellowship recognized by Scripture (1 Cor. 1:9), gathering on the ground of the One Body (1 Cor. 10:16-17), and acknowledging the authority of the Lord at His Table (1 Cor. 10:21).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, The Feast of Trumpets

Under the law, three feasts were held in the seventh month — the Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah), the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkoth). The blowing of trumpets in Israel served to gather the people together. Prophetically it refers to that day in which God will gather His people back to the land of Israel: “He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect” (Matt. 24:31). It was also a memorial to God — “a memorial of blowing of trumpets” (Lev. 23:24) — accompanied by burnt offerings, a sweet savor to God, and a sin offering (Num. 29:1-6).

Obedience to the Word of God brings joy to God; it is that joy that gives us strength. “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). This verse does not speak of our joy in God — though there will be joy and rejoicing: “Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart” (Jer. 15:16). When another derives pleasure from the things we do, it gives us encouragement and the strength to go on; how much more so when it is God. On the other hand, when we are disobedient, we are spiritually weak; Adam’s sin led him to hide from God. How important, at times such as this, that “we confess our sins” and God will be “faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

The people were clearly grieved by the things that they had heard from the law, but the Levites quieted them by saying, “Hold your peace, for the day is holy” (Neh. 9:11). Their grief was good — “grief according to God works repentance to salvation, never to be regretted” (2 Cor. 7:10 JND) — but this day was a holy assembly; it was a time to “make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob” (Psa. 81:1). Similarly, the Lord’s Supper is not a time for introspection but for the remembrance of the Lord, to show forth His death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:23-26). My salvation is not even in view, but rather, the Lord Jesus Christ and the perfectness of His person and work in the sight of God. It should bear the character of the burnt offering and not the the sin offering. We will never understand the magnitude of that work at Calvary by looking within ourselves; we can only begin to comprehend its greatness when we get a glimpse from God’s perspective.

The peoples’ weeping turned to joy, a joy that could not be contained, for “all the people went their way, to eat and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great rejoicing. For they had understood the words that were declared to them” (Neh. 8:13 JND). What an encouragement when there is spiritual comprehension and understanding.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 8:1-12, Reading the Book of the Law of Moses -

On the first day of the seventh month, on the feast of trumpets, the remnant in Judah gathered themselves as one man before the water gate to hear the Word of God. It is interesting to note, the people requested of Ezra that the book of the law of Moses be brought — the law which

Jehovah had commanded Israel (Neh. 8:1). It is a good thing to feel the need for guidance from the Word of God. A hungry soul can be fed; one that feels no hunger rejects food. Job could say: “I have esteemed the words of His mouth more than my necessary food” (Job 23:12).

The congregation consisted of both men and women, young and old — all who were of an age of understanding — and they listened attentively (Neh. 8:3). There was a reverence afforded the Word of God; when Ezra read, the people stood up. The bride laments in the Song of Songs, “By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not” (Song of Sol. 3:1-3). We will not find the communion with God that we seek when we are at ease or pleasing ourselves; attentiveness requires energy and focus. The modern trend of doing everything while plugged into an electronic device does not enhance concentration — and when it comes to the things of God, this could be downright disrespectful.

Ezra was not alone in the reading. Thirteen of his brethren stood with him: six on his right and seven on his left. We also find another 13 individuals mentioned by name, along with the Levites, who caused the people to understand the law (Neh. 8:7). And so it is in the assembly today. God has given gifts to the church of God, “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). He has given us pastors and teachers — those who will shepherd and instruct the saints of God. This is not the work of one man nor of those trained in a seminary, but it should be according to the gift that God has given. Although we may feel the lack of gift, we can still read ministry and glean those handfuls of purpose left by others, and thereby feed the flock of God — surely this is something that an aspiring shepherd can and will do.

“They read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading” (Neh. 8:8). It is important to present the Scriptures in a way that is orderly and clear. Timothy received “an outline of sound words” from the Apostle Paul (2 Tim. 1:13). Luke wrote an orderly account of events to Theophilus (Luke 1:3).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 7:5-73, Registered by Genealogy -

Not only was there a carefulness as to those without, but Nehemiah was also led by God to register the remnant by genealogy: “My God put into mine heart ... ” (Neh. 7:5). Many a problem would be avoided if our communion with God was similarly close.

The basis for the reckoning was the census recorded in the second chapter of Ezra. The reason for the registry was the same as that at the first. For Israel, born after the flesh, establishing one’s genealogy was vitally important — it determined the inheritance of each person. For the priests and Levites, it was essential for their qualification to serve in the temple. Though it was a thousand years earlier that God sanctified the tribe of Levi and the house of Aaron to Himself, nothing had changed. Outwardly, things were still largely in ruins, and the state of the temple was nothing when compared to the glory of Solomon’s, and yet, God still held his people responsible to walk in obedience to His Word. For us, born not after the flesh but of God, though two thousand years has passed since the beginning of the church, God still desires that we walk in obedience to His Word. We should be no less careful in our associations and in the administration of the assembly.

Clearly there are differences to be found between the records of Nehemiah 7 and Ezra 2. Magbish, for example, does not appear in Nehemiah, though he does in Ezra (Neh. 7:33-34 and Ezra 2:29-31). The total size of the congregation, however, remains the same: 42,360 (Ezra 2:64; Neh. 7:66). While this may appear contradictory to some, faith does not falter. It is not difficult to imagine reasons for these discrepancies, but we are not given to know. While the skeptic argues that it demonstrates the fallibility of Scripture, we could just as easily point out that if this record had been of man, he would have corrected it years ago!

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 7:3, Doors Shut and Barred -

The gates of the city were to remain closed until the sun was hot — no one was to slip in under the cover of darkness; all must be open and exposed by the light of the sun. Men love darkness because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). At other hours, the doors were to be barred and watches appointed. It wasn’t, however, just the responsibility of the porters. To draw the parallel, it is not simply the responsibility of the overseers to guard against the things that come into the assembly, but there remains a responsibility with each one of us. “Every one in his watch, and every one to be over against his house” (Neh. 7:3). Weakness in the assembly doesn’t just appear out of nowhere. The things we permit in our own homes are ultimately reflected in our attitudes in the assembly; it is not possible to stand firm on this principle or that, if we live in practical denial of them in our personal lives.

Though the city walls and administration had been restored, the number of people dwelling within the city was few (Neh. 7:4). Later we find that they cast lots to bring ten percent of the population within the city walls (Neh. 11:1). Sadly, there wasn’t the interest among the people to dwell within the confines of the city. Even today, there is a lack of interest in a living testimony to the true character of the church and Christ as its head as expressed through the assembly. It seems to be of little consequence, and people want the liberty to gather together and worship in the manner of their own choosing.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 7:2, Hanani and Hananiah -

Nehemiah’s brother, Hanani — whom we first encountered at Shushan the palace giving a report concerning Jerusalem to Nehemiah (Neh. 1:2) — and Hananiah, the ruler of the palace, were given charge over Jerusalem. I do not believe that this was a case of nepotism, but rather, these men were qualified. We already have some idea as to the character of Hanani from the first chapter, but to this we find added: “He was a faithful man, and feared God above many” (Neh. 7:2). The overseer is to be irreproachable, conducting his own house well; if he cannot care for his own house, then he is in no position to take care of the assembly (1 Tim. 3:2,5). Paul’s instruction to Titus likewise reflects the need for faithfulness: “a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God ... holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught”

(Titus 1:7,9). Whether we ever find ourselves in a place of oversight or not, God desires that we are faithful with that which He has committed to our trust. Do we not desire to hear Him say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant”? Faithfulness in small things is rewarded: “thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things” (Matt. 25:21).

The names for these two men are most fitting. Hanani means “my grace” whereas Hananiah is “Jehovah is gracious.” One who knows not the grace of God in their own lives will be an overbearing taskmaster. Paul described his old self as “an insolent overbearing man” (1 Tim. 1:13 JND). As the Apostle, however, he wrote: “[we] have been gentle in the midst of you, as a nurse would cherish her own children.” (1 Thess. 2:7 JND). Let us once again remind ourselves of Peter’s instruction to the elders: “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-3). In the history of Christendom, it quickly changed from “the flock of God” to “my flock,” and God’s heritage became “my heritage.” It should not surprise us that the word “clergy” derives from the Greek word for heritage, “kleros.” The clergy, a class ordained to perform pastoral or priestly duties, is not to be found in the New Testament. Although its roots may be found in Judaism, its implementation surely rests with the pride of man and his desire to be something. Of course, both are incompatible with Christianity and God’s order in the assembly.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 7:1, Porters, Singers, and Levites -

Nehemiah is not satisfied merely with the completion of the physical wall. No, this was just the beginning. Jerusalem was to be administered according to principles laid out in the Word of God — especially those established by King David. Nehemiah appoints porters, singers, and Levites. The order is most instructive.

Firstly we have the porters; these minded the gates. Though it may be contrary to our natural thoughts, God would have us to be vigilant as to who comes and goes in the assembly. As we have earlier observed, Jerusalem was where God had placed His name. Today, however, if we are found gathered together unto His name, then that place is now the assembly. Initially, in the history of the church, physical persecution was a very real possibility; Paul was not at first received out of fear, and Barnabas had to vouch for him (Acts 9:26-27). Later, the Apostle himself had to warn those in a position of oversight at Ephesus that some would come in among them as grievous wolves (Acts 20:29). The overseer was especially tasked with the care of the assembly (1 Tim. 3:5). In the Revelation, the church at Ephesus is commended for having rejected false apostles (Rev. 2:2). Finally, Jude must bring to the notice of the saints that ungodly men had crept in among them unawares (Jude 4). Whereas Ephesus hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6), the assembly at Pergamos had allowed those that held that doctrine into their very midst (Rev. 2:15).

Secondly, we read that Nehemiah appointed singers. These appear to have first been appointed by David: “These are they whom David set over the service of song in the house of the Lord, after that the ark had rest. And they ministered before the dwelling place of the tabernacle of the congregation with singing, until Solomon had built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem: and then they waited on their office according to their order” (1 Chron. 6:31-32). They offered up praise to God day and night (1 Chron. 9:33). Surely, we are reminded of our sacrifice of praise: “let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually” (Heb. 13:15). Such praise need not be limited to times of worship, though it would seem that this was the primary intent. Paul and Silas, in their darkest hour, were found praising God with singing (Acts 16:25).

Lastly, we read of the Levites. These were “appointed unto all manner of service of the tabernacle of the house of God” (1 Chron. 6:48). As with the pattern we see elsewhere in Scripture, that portion which belongs to God comes first — worship — and then service follows. Leviticus precedes the book of Numbers; our sacrifice of praise is to take precedence over our giving of self and substance (Heb. 13:15-16).

All, however, is under the watchful care of the porters. God’s glory and honor must always be maintained. In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, where so much was wrong, he emphasizes the Lordship of Christ. We are “called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). To the Colossians, he must bring before them the headship of Christ. “He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the preeminence” (Col. 1:18). It is not our house; it is the house of God.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, The Wall Completed

Finally the day came when the wall and gates were completed. Despite the efforts of the enemy, it was accomplished in just 52 days (Neh. 6:15). Notwithstanding the obvious labor involved, and the great effort required to replace the stones that made up the wall, we never once read of technical difficulties. No, all the trials came from those that opposed the work!

The Word of God is not so complicated that we cannot understand it — the difficulty in comprehension is not a mechanical one. However, it is only to the degree that we desire to do His will, that we shall learn and understand it. “If any one desire to practise His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is of God” (John 7:17 JND). When we are self-seeking, then all becomes complicated. On the other hand, when we seek to do God’s will, we should expect plenty of opposition!

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Nehemiah - Neh. 6:1-19, Personal Attacks on

As the rebuilding of the wall neared completion, the enemy’s tactics once again changed. No longer able to sneak in among the workers, they sought to draw Nehemiah away on the pretence to “meet together” (Neh. 6:2). They understood that if they could make Nehemiah afraid, then the strength of the people would fail. Nehemiah recognized, however, that the work he had been called to do was a great work, one which he could not leave. Sadly, how little we realize that strengthening the things which remain is a great work (Rev. 3:2). It might be

acceptable to go out into the world to evangelize, but, “Building walls! We should be knocking them down!” is the universal cry of Christendom today.

Sanballat then sought to engage Nehemiah through false accusations, saying that the heathen believed he was planning to set himself up as a king, and that he had prophets declaring that it must be so (Neh. 6:6-7). One must give Nehemiah a good deal of credit for not being caught up in the devices of the enemy. How quickly we feel the need to defend ourselves. Rather, Nehemiah simply told Sanballat that they had invented these lies in their own hearts (Neh. 6:8). It should not be underestimated how dangerous this was for Nehemiah; he was being accused of rebellion. It was not unlike those accusations laid against our Lord (Luke 23:2). Nehemiah recognized that they were trying to weaken his hands through fear, and once again he turned to God with a simple prayer: “Strengthen my hands” (Neh. 6:9).

The counterpart to these accusations still goes on today. Suggest that there is a right path, and only one such path — whether it is for salvation or the ground of gathering — and quickly there will be accusations, “you’re setting yourself up to be somebody!” William Kelly wrote, “If we act upon the Word, and nothing else, we shall find God with us. It will be called bigotry; but this is part of the reproach of Christ. Faith will always appear proud to those who have none; but it will be proved in the day of the Lord to be the only humility, and that everything which is not faith is pride, or no better. Faith admits that he who has it is nothing — that he has no power nor wisdom of his own, and he looks to God. May we be strong in faith, giving glory to Him!” There is a difference between recognizing the truth and seeking to walk in it, versus setting oneself up to be something. Nehemiah knew that the work he did was great and he let no one deter him from it.

Shemaiah was one that was shut up — probably feigning fear for what might befall them. Nevertheless, it appears as if Nehemiah paid this man a friendly visit. Shemaiah suggested that they flee to the temple for safety from their foe. Nehemiah, however, would have none of it. As a good soldier he did not flee the enemy, and as a faithful servant of God, he knew that it was inappropriate for him to use the temple in that manner. As it turned out, Shemaiah was in the pay of Sanballat and Tobiah.

Even when the wall was finished, there were many in Judah that sought to influence Nehemiah’s attitude towards Tobiah, the Ammonite, for many were sworn unto him (Neh. 6:18). Despite the work of Ezra and the exercise of some among the people some 13 years earlier concerning mixed marriages, we find that Tobiah was son-in-law to Shechaniah and that his son Johanan had married the daughter of Meshullam. Meshullam had resisted Ezra (Ezra 10:15 JND), and it would now appear that he had never repented, even though he is listed among those who had put away their strange wives (Ezra 10:29). The Ammonites were descendants of Lot and were, therefore, related to Israel (Gen. 19:37-38). Very often it is those “near relatives” that cause us the greatest trial. Having once known the truth, but having departed from it, they undermine the work and seek to bring us onto the same ground as themselves. “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord forever” (Deut. 23:3).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Nehemiah's Personal Conduct - Neh. 5:14-19

Nehemiah’s personal conduct parallels that of the Apostle Paul. Though as governor he had a right to be supplied by the people, he would not make himself chargeable to them (Neh. 5:14-15). “If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:11-13). Nehemiah walked in the fear of God; to avail himself of the privileges that his position could have demanded would have been a stumbling block to the people. Paul, likewise, would not take from the people lest the gospel should be hindered. How could Nehemiah live in riches when his brethren suffered depravation? “For all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people” (Neh. 5:18). Instead, Nehemiah labored right there beside his brethren, building up the wall (Neh. 5:16).

The Corinthians reigned as kings, but it is not now the time to reign — there is a coming day for that: “ye have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you” (1 Cor. 4:8). Sadly in Christendom today, we see open and bold solicitations for money, and temporal rewards are viewed as God’s blessing. Peter’s warnings are very true: “through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you” (2 Pet. 2:3). How unlike Nehemiah, who waited upon God for his blessing and recompense: “Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people” (Neh. 5:19).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 5:1-13, Problems Within -

Time and time again we see that when Satan fails with an aggressive frontal attack, he adopts a more subtle and deceitful manner, and nothing seems more effective than sowing discord among the saints of God. The fifth chapter of Nehemiah is a parenthetical chapter, though just as important to the story; in it we find that Nehemiah must address the abuses of the Jews against their brethren. If in the previous chapter we see the shield, girdle, and sword of the Christian’s armor, here we have the breastplate of righteousness.

There was a drought in the land and the purchase of corn had become a burden to the poor (Neh. 5:3). Some found it necessary to mortgage their property to buy food (Neh. 5:4). Others had committed their sons and daughters to be servants (Neh. 5:5). Finally, some had borrowed money to pay the kings tribute.

There appears to have been quite a distinction between the rich and the poor. Riches are a danger: “They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare” (1 Tim. 6:9). James warns against both gathering riches and of oppressing the poor: “Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you ... Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth” (James 5:1,4).

The Jew was given explicit direction in the Law as to how the poor were to be treated (Deut. 15). Not only were they to open their hand wide (vss. 78) but the seventh year was a year of release; all debts were to be forgiven as a “release to Jehovah” (Deut. 15:2). Under law they were

also forbidden to lend with usury. If, while under law, such grace was to be shown in such matters, how much more so in this day in which we live!

Nehemiah was filled with righteous indignation at the behavior of his fellows and he consulted with himself (Neh. 5:7). His corrupt brethren were of no help to him in this matter; rather, he was shut up to the Word of God for guidance. The nobles and rulers should have been shepherds. Instead, they had lorded it over God's heritage (1 Peter 5:3). "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (Rom. 15:1).

We should also walk in the fear of God, honoring Him, lest we cause our enemies to blaspheme God and to reproach us because of our behavior (Neh. 5:9; Rom. 2:24). Nehemiah's own conduct in liberating his brethren from the service of the heathen stands in stark contrast, and yet, he identifies himself with his brethren and says, "Let us leave off this usury" (Neh. 5:10). When there is a them and an us, Satan has succeeded in his work — the saints are divided. Nehemiah also instructs the rulers to restore the lands and houses and to repay the interest exacted. Leaving off isn't sufficient; there must also be restitution.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 4:13-23, The Armor of God -

Nehemiah's position was to be prepared, to be armed and ready, to watch, and to stand his ground. His faith rested upon Jehovah, the great and terrible God — the same God that delivered Israel from Egypt (Neh. 4:14; Deut. 10:21-22). "Our God shall fight for us" (Neh. 4:20). Nehemiah does not attack; he is, however, prepared to fight for his brethren, their sons and daughters, their wives and their houses. The battle must begin in the home. Just as the men built the wall to protect their homes, they are now prepared to fight for their homes.

Timothy is exhorted to "fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life" (1 Tim. 6:12). There must be an earnest contending for the faith; Satan will never give up trying to weaken and destroy the body of Christian truth. If we are going to live in the good of the things into which we have been brought through the work of Christ, we must lay hold of it in a decisive fashion. The children of Israel never possessed what was rightfully theirs, because they didn't walk it: "Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you" (Josh. 1:3). As a result, the enemy was never driven out.

With one hand they labored and with the other they held a weapon: "Every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded" (Neh. 4:17-18). The girdle served two purposes: it kept the tunic from flapping about, and it provided a place to hang the sword. We are told in Ephesians, "Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth" (Eph. 6:15). This is the first item of the soldier's dress. It seems so elementary that it hardly appears worth mentioning. To the contrary, unless the Christian is securely girt about with the Word of Truth, there is no hope of wielding the sword aright. How many a young Christian has rushed off to fight some spiritual battle with their tunic just thrown about them. They are "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14), and they quickly succumb to the subtleties of the enemy.

The one offensive weapon we have is the "sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17). This is the only means we have of refuting the wiles of the devil — and note that it is the sword of the Spirit; it's not my sword. Our example is the Lord Himself, who, when tried in the wilderness, countered each attack of the enemy with the Word of God (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). He neither sought to engage the devil nor to argue with him. This should be a strong lesson to us. Never underestimate the strength of the enemy — it must be God who fights for us (Neh. 4:20).

The work of a soldier is not an easy one. Neither Nehemiah nor his men, servants, and guards, put off their clothes during this period. Paul encourages the young man Timothy, "Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please Him who hath chosen him to be a soldier" (Neh. 4:23).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 4:7-12, The Difficulties Mount -

When Sanballat sees the ever-shrinking gaps in the wall, he and his companions became very angry (Neh. 4:7). The enemy does not give up easily. Satan does not like to see a distinction between the people of God and the world. Sanballat's confederacy grows — Arabians, Ammonites and Ashdodites are now numbered with them. These conspire to see how they can fight against Jerusalem and hinder the work. Again, Nehemiah responds, "Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them" (Neh. 4:9).

The obstacles to the work, however, were not all external, some were internal. Four difficulties confronted the builders:

"The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed" (Neh. 4:10).

"There is much rubbish" (Neh. 4:10).

"Our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them" (Neh. 4:11).

"The Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you" (Neh. 4:12).

In the first instance, their initial strength had failed and weakness had come in. This is not uncommon in any work; the Ephesians are reproved for having left their first love (Rev. 3:4). Trials often reveal the reality of the heart. Endurance is much spoken of in Scripture — the word translated "patience," is often better rendered "endurance." "Tribulation works endurance" (Rom. 5:3 JND).

In the next instance, the accumulation of rubbish proved to be a discouragement. It is no different today; how often we hear that it's not possible to hold back the rising tide — and that may indeed be true. However, we don't need to be caught in it. We can go on in the simplicity

of Scripture without the encumbrances of centuries of rubbish.

In Jude's epistle we read, "Earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares" (Jude 3-4). If the enemy cannot succeed with external attacks, then he will seek to infiltrate, undermine, and corrupt. There are countless numbers in Christendom today who deny the only Lord God. With the internet, radio, and TV, many voices can be brought into the homes of the saints; we need to be on guard against what we allow into the very midst of our families. What comes into the family will ultimately find its way into the assembly. "Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them" (2 Tim. 3:14).

The final conflict was perhaps the hardest to bear. There were Jews who dwelt nearby, who were not involved in the work, which came ten times and verified the veracity of the enemies' words. It is difficult when other Christians wear the saints down with their negativity — it's not worth it; we're so small, what difference does it make; the church is so divided, it doesn't matter what we do; and so it goes on.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 4:6, A Mind to Work -

Nehemiah's calm conclusion to the matter is: "So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work" (Neh. 4:6). Nehemiah's confidence in God is reflected in the people's willingness to work. Oneness in a work is not produced by common agreement; oneness is produced by having one mind, and that mind is God's mind. "I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord" (Phil. 4:2). Paul is not exhorting them to get together and come to an agreement, but rather, as we find earlier in this letter: "Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Phil. 2:2). And what mind would that be? "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). Only when we have the mind of Christ will there be concord and unity.

Despite Nehemiah's prayer, this was not the end of the trouble. Though there was an initial respite, the enemy's attacks are renewed. Was God's answer to Nehemiah's prayer incomplete? No! God's deliverance is not always to take us out of our circumstances; sometimes He must take us through them.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 4:1-5, Trouble -

Whenever there is a recovery of the truth and separation from that which is contrary to the Word of God, there will also be strong opposition.

Sanballat's mocking takes on a darker hue and he is filled with wrath and great indignation (Neh. 4:1). At the first he was grieved, and then he mocked; now he gathers his militia to oppose the work. It is interesting to note that he objected not only to the fact that "these feeble Jews" would fortify themselves, but that they would sacrifice (Neh. 4:2). A return to true worship was obnoxious to this pretender, just as those that seek to worship God in Spirit and in truth today are called exclusive and bigoted. To Sanballat, this was nothing more than reviving stones out of heaps of rubbish. Likewise, a return to the foundation stones of the church, as laid by the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 3:10), is seen today in the same light.

Tobiah's belittling of the project (Neh. 4:8) seems to belie a fear that the wall might actually be completed! Many today will mock the things that we hold dear; the inspired Word of God is called a fairy tale. Beneath the surface, however, their conscience is with us. Rather than reacting to the offence, Nehemiah casts all upon God in prayer, "Hear, O our God; for we are despised" (Neh. 4:4). One walking boldly in the path of faith need never falter nor fear; if we are doing God's work, then who can stop it? If we are despised, is it not the Lord who is really despised? Can He not take it? This is the shield of faith in action; it is good to make it as large as possible and to hide beneath its protecting shadow.

A point of contrast is to be noted. In this present dispensation of grace it is not our place to say "let not their sin be blotted out from before Thee" (Neh. 4:5). Rather, we are to "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not" (Rom. 12:14). Grace, however, does not result in injustice; unjudged sin will ultimately be addressed. "Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 3:1-32, The Gates -

There are many spiritual lessons to be gained from a study of the gates presented in Nehemiah. Of all the city gates, only ten are mentioned. We know that there were at least two other gates: the gate of Ephraim and the Prison gate (Neh. 12:39). In presenting just ten, I believe that there is an intended spiritual application, just as we find with the seven churches of Revelation. Certainly, the choice of ten suggests responsibility before God — there were ten commandments written on the two tables of stone (Deut. 4:13), and there were ten virgins (Matt. 25). We also see a spiritual history pictured in these gates. Beginning with the Reformation and continuing on into the 19th century, there was a recovery of truth — nothing new — but the restoration of the truth as found in the Word of God. Most critically, these historical gates have rapidly fallen into decay and are once again in danger of being abandoned.

The sheep gate was near to the temple. Live animals for the sacrifices would have been brought into the city through this gate. It is the first gate mentioned and also the last (Neh. 3:1,32). The wall began and ended with this gate. Likewise, everything in the life of faith rests upon that one, perfect sacrifice of the Lamb of God (John 1:29). "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:4). Nothing that we do for God has any value in His sight, unless we have first placed our faith in the finished work of Christ (Heb. 11:6). There is nothing that we can do to improve our standing before God: we cannot do works to gain acceptance with God nor to make us worthy of His grace. We are saved through faith — faith in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. "By grace are ye saved through faith;

and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

On the other hand, it is because of the cross that we are to walk in practical separation from this world — I have no place in a world that crucified my Saviour, and the world has no place in my life. "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Place names in Israel tended towards the practical. Whereas we may choose a name with hidden meanings, things in Israel were commonly named according to their associations (Gen. 26:19-22; 28:19; 32:2; Num. 11:3, etc.). The association of fish with the Fish Gate is therefore more than reasonable; this was probably the gate through which fish traders brought their fish into the city (Neh. 3:3).

Although the wall of Jerusalem clearly speaks of separation, it was not without gates. Likewise, as Christians, we are not called upon to live in isolation. The gates of the city provided entry, in this case for fish to be brought in to the city, and egress, so one could go fishing! In John's Gospel we read, "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9). In Judaism there was a strong wall of separation between the nations and Israel — the Gentiles were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel (Eph. 2:12-14). Now it is "if any man"; the way of salvation stands open to all through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is through Christ that we enter into salvation, and it is through Christ that we go out in service preaching the gospel. When the truth of salvation through faith alone was restored at the time of the reformation, gospel preachers went forth to spread the Good News. Though the recovery of truth at that time was very limited, it was a brilliant flash of light that pierced the darkness of that age.

When the Lord called Peter and Andrew, He told them that He would make them fishers of men, instead of fishermen (Mark 1:17). While we may not all have the gift of evangelism, we are not to be ashamed of the gospel of Christ (Rom. 1:16). We should always be ready to "give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). In this sense, we can all "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim. 4:5).

We should also notice, however, that the fish having been gathered were brought into the city. Likewise, those that are saved should be brought into the assembly where Christ is in the midst (Matt. 18:20). "There shall be one flock, one Shepherd" (John 10:16 JND).

"The old gate repaired Jehoiada the son of Paseah, and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah; they laid the beams thereof, and set up the doors thereof, and the locks thereof, and the bars thereof"

"that which was from the beginning"

"Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein"

It was no happenstance that the invention of the printing press and the publishing of the Scriptures coincided with the beginning of the Reformation. There is nothing that the Church of Rome feared more than for lay people to obtain copies of the Bible, especially in their own language. While it is certainly true that men have misused the Scriptures, applying fanciful interpretations to God's word, nevertheless, we believe it to be "quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword" (Heb. 4:12). Indeed, it was a formidable weapon in the hands of those men who were raised up of God to overthrow the dogmas of the Church of Rome and break her deadly embrace upon Christendom of the middle ages.

For a child in Israel, his or her inheritance was most important. The boundaries laid down by Joshua defined the extent of the land owned by each family. Land was not bought or sold as we know it — it could, in effect, be leased, but at the year of Jubilee (the fiftieth year) it reverted back to the original owner (Lev. 25:10). Land was inherited but the transfer of land between tribes through marriage was not permitted. The daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 36) valued their heritage but were not permitted to marry outside of their tribe, lest the lot of Manasseh was diminished. Property extents were marked, and, under the law, it was forbidden to remove those landmarks. "Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance, which thou shalt inherit in the land that the Lord thy God giveth thee to possess it" (Deut. 19:14). Too often, we slight the spiritual heritage that we have received, and the old landmarks are forsaken or moved. One can imagine a son or daughter who inherited land in Israel, walking their property lines, taking in the full extent of what they possessed. Like Joshua, it is only where our feet tread that we gain possession for ourselves. "Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you" (Josh. 1:3).

Geographically a valley is a low point; spiritually, it could speak of a low point in our lives. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me" (Psa. 23:4). David could walk in the valley of the shadow of death but without fear of evil, for Jehovah his Shepherd was with him. Remarkably, he was comforted by His rod and staff — I say remarkably, because we do not usually think of God's chastening hand as a comfort. Though we may stray or wander, or get ourselves into scrapes that bring us down into the valley, God is also a God of the valleys. He will neither leave us nor forsake us, and His loving hand will always guide, whether it be by rod or by staff. "Thus saith the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, The Lord is God of the hills, but He is not God of the valleys, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the Lord" (1 Kings 20:28).

Notice, that in connection with the valley gate, we have the only dimension given: "a thousand cubits on the wall" (Neh. 3:13). This was no small distance; something more than a quarter of a mile! The labor expended to move those huge blocks of stone would have been considerable. What God permits in our lives, however, is precisely measured according to the need: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able" (1 Cor. 10:13).

While the application of this gate to the individual may be a wonderful encouragement, there is perhaps another figure not to be overlooked. Does not this entire world lie in the valley of the shadow of death? The shadow of the cross casts itself across this scene; the world lies under the sentence of judgment (John 16:11). To the eye of faith we are passing through a wilderness, and we find ourselves strangers and pilgrims in a foreign land (Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 2:11). Friendship with this world is nothing short of spiritual adultery (James 4:4).

The heavenly character of the church, as preached by the Apostle Paul (Eph. 2:6), was recognized some 185 years ago. This practical truth, however, is fast being forgotten, and Christendom as a whole lies lifeless in the streets of this world (Acts 20:9). Ephesus, the first of the seven churches, was separate from the world. Smyrna, the second century church, was persecuted by the world. With Pergamos, in the days

of Constantine, we see the church comfortable with the world, whereas with Thyatira, the Church of Rome, ruled the world. The world protected Sardis in the days of the Reformation. The church of Philadelphia is rejected by the world, while in Laodicea, the final state of Christendom, we see the church as one with the world!

The Dung gate, as the name suggests, would have been the portal for the expulsion of refuse from the city. In the days of Josiah, during a time of revival in Judah, much was found in the city of Jerusalem contrary to the Word of God — groves and altars and vessels made for Baal in the temple. All these were taken outside the city and destroyed, and Jerusalem was cleansed (2 Kings 23:4; 2 Chron. 34:3-5). Two things characterized the revival of that day: the restoration of the right and proper place of the Word of God in the lives of the people, and the cleansing from Judah of all that was contrary to the Word of God.

Christendom finds itself in a position similar to that of Josiah's day; there is much characteristic of Judaism, paganism, and the philosophy of this world, to be found within its doctrine and practice. During the early days of the reformation, the churches of Europe were cleansed of their icons and images, and their altars and masses were done away with. Nevertheless, much remained of church tradition, and the true nature of the church of God was not recognized. In the words of the first president of the Dallas Theological College, "It was given to Martin Luther in the sixteenth century to reinstate the doctrine of salvation through faith alone, and, in the last century, it was given to J. N. Darby of England to reinstate the doctrine of the church."

Martin Luther did not personally see the necessity of removing the idols from the churches; he feared that it would stir up the people. In this he perhaps perceived correctly. We are not called upon to be Iconoclasts, but rather, "let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 2:19). We are never instructed to reform Christendom, but rather, to separate from all that is contrary to the Word of God. In a great house where there are vessels to honor and some to dishonor, our path is a path of separation: "If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work. Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:21-22). Those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart are those who have separated themselves from that which is dishonoring to God; it is not a question of setting oneself above others with an immodest and false piety.

Of himself personally, Paul could speak concerning all that he had pursued as a Pharisee, "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (Phil. 3:8).

The fountain gate is close to the pool of Siloah (Siloam; John 9:7); apparently it was associated with a fountain or spring of water. Water, in the Holy Scriptures, is a picture of the Word of God, and flowing water speaks of the Holy Spirit: "He that believeth on Me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive)" (John 7:38-39). The Lord told the Samaritan woman at the well, "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14).

Each believer in Christ is indwelt with the Holy Spirit. "Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His" (Rom. 8:9). The activity of the Spirit of God in our lives should be real — it is the power of the new life that we possess in Christ. It should be like a spring of water bubbling up in our lives.

Just, however, as a natural spring can become clogged and cease to flow, so we can grieve the Spirit (Eph. 4:30). The fountain gate is the only gate of which we read "he built it, and covered it" (Neh. 3:15). In the Song of Songs we read, "A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (Song of Sol. 4:12). So we, too, should be a sealed fountain, keeping out that which will grieve the Spirit.

We can also quench the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19); Paul had to exhort Timothy to "stir up the gift of God, which is in thee" (2 Tim. 1:6). The quenching of the Holy Spirit, however, especially refers to the suppressing of the activity of the Spirit in the assembly. One man ministry quenches the Spirit. Likewise, the willful and independent activity of individuals within the assembly can also have a chilling effect on the liberty of the Spirit (3 John 9-10). This liberty of the Holy Spirit to act within the assembly, to direct worship and ministry, as we see so prominently in the Book of Acts, was, if not foreign, then certainly not acted upon throughout much of the church's history. It was not until the early part of the 19th century that men, such as J. N. Darby, were exercised by the true character of the Biblical church, and liberty was once again given for the Spirit to act within the assembly.

We should not, however, have our focus on spiritual manifestations as did the Corinthians, and as we see in Charismatic movements today. The Spirit of God does not glorify man, but rather, He exalts the Lord Jesus Christ and makes known His present glory: "He shall glorify Me: for He shall receive of Mine, and shall shew it unto you" (John 16:14).

To repeat, water is often a picture of the Word of God. "Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:25-26). "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

We receive the Holy Scriptures, in their entirety, as the divinely inspired Word of God (2 Tim. 3:15-16). "Prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). It is complete; we do not look for additional revelations from man or God (Col. 1:25 JND; Rev. 22:18-19). The Bible is the ultimate arbitrator. We must, however, rightly divide the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15). If we bring our thoughts to the Word of God, we can make it mean whatever we desire it to mean.

We are epistles of Christ (2 Cor. 3:3); our walk, both individually and collectively, should reflect the truth of the Word of God as a testimony to this world. Until the early 1800s, the collective testimony to the true character of the church as the Body of Christ was entirely lost upon Christendom. Christ is the glorified Head in heaven, and we, being members together of His body through the Holy Spirit, are to be governed by the Spirit. That we should walk uprightly and godly is not disputed; but suggest that the collective conduct of the church should be equally governed by the Word of God, and then at once there are objections. It is either too difficult, or else the interpretation of those scriptures that address this subject is so liberal that it renders them devoid of any substance.

One of the most beautiful descriptions of a horse may be found in the book of Job: "Hast thou given strength to the horse? hast thou clothed his neck with the quivering mane? Dost thou make him to leap as a locust? His majestic snorting is terrible. He paweth in the valley, and

rejoiceth in his strength; he goeth forth to meet the armed host. He laugheth at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from before the sword. The quiver rattleth upon him, the glittering spear and the javelin. He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage, and cannot contain himself at the sound of the trumpet: at the noise of the trumpets he saith, Aha! and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting" (Job 39:19-25 JND).

The horse clearly betokens strength. As such, the kings of Israel were not to accumulate horses (Deut. 17:16). God foresaw that it would lead them back to Egypt and to a dependence upon their own strength and not upon Jehovah. King David could write: "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God" (Psa. 20:7). In another Psalm we read: "An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength" (Psa. 33:17). Isaiah warned, "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!" (Isa. 31:1). It was a serious mistake of the reformers to depend on national governments for the promotion and protection of the principles of the reformation. In Sardis, unlike Ephesus, we do not find the seven stars in the Lord's right hand. The protection of the church had been placed in the hands of governments.

Although the world says that strength lies in numbers, the Lord must teach us that, "there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6). In Gideon's case, it was just 300 men (Judg. 7:7). The Lord had to tell Zerubbabel, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6). William Kelly wrote, "One of the truest signs of practical communion with the Lord is that at such a moment one is heartily content to be little." Later in this book of Nehemiah we will read, "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:10). When the Lord can take delight in our walk — a dependent walk of obedience to Him and His word — then we have strength; it's neither numbers nor our own estimation of ourselves that count.

"Afterward he brought me to the gate, even the gate that looketh toward the east: and, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and His voice was like a noise of many waters: and the earth shined with His glory"

"Come up hither"

The hope of the church should have always been for the return of the bridegroom for His heavenly bride. Paul could write to the assembly in Thessalonica, "Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven" (1 Thess. 1:9), and likewise to Titus on the Isle of Crete, "Awaiting the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). We should live out our lives in the light of this daily expectation.

When the church lost her true hope, she became like the evil servant: "that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken" (Matt. 24:48). What an apt description of the dark ages! Sadly, this blessed hope was not recognized by the reformers, and the church, failing to recover her true, heavenly position, remained entangled with the politics of this world.

It was not until the early 1800s that the midnight cry was made, "Behold, the Bridegroom" (Matt. 25:6 JND). It is good to recognize that this verse doesn't say, as it does in the King James, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh." Our hope is the Lord Himself. It is not merely that we'll be taken out of all that is disagreeable, but that we will be united with Him. Though the Lord has promised, "Surely I come quickly," the bride simply answers: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). That is to say, our attitudes should not be, "hurry up and get me out of here," but rather, "come, Lord Jesus." It is a hope rooted in love.

Gate Miphkad may be translated, "the gate of the appointed place." In chapter 12 of Deuteronomy we find a description of the land of Canaan in the days of Joshua. The nations that occupied it served their gods upon every high mountain, on the hills, and under every green tree (Deut. 12:2). The children of Israel were not to behave in this manner (Deut. 12:4). "But unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put His name there, even unto His habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come" (Deut. 12:5).

The tabernacle was first pitched in Shiloh, but this was rejected by God in favor of Mount Zion — which is Jerusalem (Psa. 78:67-68). It was there, upon mount Moriah where Abraham had offered up Isaac, that God's sanctuary was to be built (Gen. 22:2; 2 Chron. 3:1). "There shall be a place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell there; thither shall ye bring all that I command you; your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, your tithes, and the heave offering of your hand, and all your choice vows which ye vow unto the Lord" (Deut. 12:11).

God's dwelling place is now the assembly, "in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22). "Where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). This is the appointed place. It is just as wrong in this day to do whatever is right in our own eyes as it was in Israel's day (Deut. 12:8). Likewise, we have no more right to worship in the place of our choosing (Deut. 12:13-14) than in former days. It is the Lord's day, the Lord's table, and the Lord's supper.

When the tabernacle was built, it was to be constructed after God's pattern (Ex. 25:9). The prophet Ezekiel was to show the house of God, the temple, to Israel that they might measure the pattern and be ashamed of their iniquities — they had deviated far from God's plan (Ezek. 43:10). Christendom has deviated far from God's plan for His church and she has adopted many things from Judaism, paganism, and of her own contrivance.

Unless we recognize the place of God's appointment, unless we see by faith the Lord in the midst, there will be no attractive power to preserve, and we'll be governed by the vagaries of our own wills. We may be in the assembly because that's where we grew up; we might find ourselves there because that's where our friends are; we could even be there because we don't like what we see elsewhere (as valid as that may be); but, we will either leave when circumstances change, or we'll attempt to shape the assembly to satisfy our own desires, if we don't see Christ in the midst.

In those ancient cities, it was at the gate that judgment was made: "Then went Boaz up to the gate, and sat him down there" (Ruth 4:1). The gate of the appointed place would, I believe, especially bring before us the administrative responsibility of the assembly. Judgment is made in the assembly because Christ is in the midst — that is where she derives her authority, and it is for this reason she must act. The assembly has a responsibility to guard and to judge that which comes into its midst.

First to be mentioned in the rebuilding of the wall is Eliashib, the high priest. He, and the priests with him, undertook to rebuild the sheep gate up to the towers that flanked it. While this was a prominent work, Eliashib does not appear to have wholeheartedly entered into the task. Whereas, we read of locks and bars for the other gates (Neh. 3:3,6, etc.), we do not read of these being restored to the sheep gate. Eliashib evidently saw little value in separating from those that opposed Israel; it would appear that he even saw them as friends! Eliashib was a kinsman of Tobiah, the Ammonite, and he would ultimately prepare him a chamber in the house of God (Neh. 13:5). Furthermore, Eliashib appears to have neglected his own house, both literally and morally. On the one hand, others had to rebuild the walls of his house (Neh. 3:20-21), while on the other, we learn that his grandson was son-in-law to Sanballat (Neh. 13:28). This is a man who likes a prominent position amongst his brethren but never enters into the spirit of their position or work, and as a consequence, that practical holiness that should characterize a sanctified people is not reflected in his life.

Next, we find the men of Jericho building (Neh. 3:2). A curse had been declared upon the one who rebuilt Jericho; it was a city whose walls were not to be restored (Josh. 6:26; 1 Kings 16:34). How like man to neglect that which is to be built and to build that which is to be destroyed. We do not know how these men came to live in Jericho, but they joined in this work of the Lord. Perhaps they knew something of deliverance from a curse. In type, they correspond to those who can join with the Apostle Paul in saying, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Gal. 3:13).

The Tekoites also labored, but, sadly, we find that “their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord” (Neh. 3:5). Perhaps they felt that manual labor was beneath them; worse than that, they were a poor example to those that did work. “The elders which are among you I exhort ... feed the flock of God which is among you ... neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). The faith of the leaders should be a model for those whom they lead. “Remember your leaders who have spoken to you the word of God; and considering the issue of their conversation, imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7 JND). Those among the Tekoites who labored, despite the poor attitude of their leaders, must be especially commended, for there was a second section that they also undertook to repair! “The Tekoites repaired another piece, over against the great tower” (Neh. 3:27).

We also find the Gibeonites among those that labored (Neh. 3:7). The history of these people is a most interesting one. Their forebearers had deceived Joshua in making a treaty with them; as a result, they were made hewers of wood and drawers of water (Josh. 9:27). Saul violated that agreement by killing some of them, but God held Israel accountable. For their part, the Gibeonites appear to have valued the position into which they had been brought, even if that meant being forever servants to the house of God (Josh. 9:23). As Gentiles they were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, but they stuck with Israel through thick or thin. We even read that one of David’s mighty men was a Gibeonite (1 Chron. 12:4).

The goldsmiths, apothecaries and merchants joined in the work (Neh. 3:8,31-32). One’s natural vocation should not hinder in one’s work for the Lord. It may be that we have an ability that lends itself to accounting, carpentry, medicine, farming or whatever the case may be, but it should neither detract from nor prevent one from exercising the spiritual gift they have received (1 Peter 4:10). On the other hand, it is appropriate to have an occupation; it is godly order that we provide for our own (1 Tim. 5:8; 2 Thess. 3:10-12).

Thankfully, not all the nobles behaved like the Tekoites; Hur (Neh. 3:9), Shallum (vs. 12), Malchiah (vs. 14), Shallun (vs. 15), Nehemiah, the son of Azbuk (vs. 16), Hashabiah (vs. 16), Bavai (vs. 18), Ezer (vs. 19) all put their hands to the work — in each case, they were either co-rulers or rulers over cities.

There were several that had a vested interest in repairing the wall. Jedaiah repaired over against his house (Neh. 3:10). As with Rahab’s house in Jericho, dwellings were often attached to the city wall. We find others likewise repairing the wall in the vicinity of their homes: Benjamin (Neh. 3:23), the priests (Neh. 3:28), and Zadok (Neh. 3:29). Separation must begin in our own homes. Holiness in the assembly cannot be sustained when looseness is permitted in the domestic circle; godliness begins at home: “If any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God” (1 Tim. 5:4). If we do not have a care for our homes and what is permitted to enter them, then we cannot expect to keep our children. In the case of Berechiah, it does not appear that he had a house — simply a chamber — and yet he valued it and repaired the wall “over against his chamber” (Neh. 3:30).

In the case of Shallum, a ruler whom we have already noted, we read that he and his daughters repaired the wall. It is very important that daughters are not neglected when it comes to spiritual things; they also need to be encouraged to be good stewards of their spiritual gifts (1 Pet. 4:10). Though a woman is not to teach publicly, nor to usurp authority over a man, she will be instrumental in shaping the lives of her sons and daughters (1 Tim. 2:12). “The unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also” (2 Tim. 1:5). Many children have been brought to the Lord by their mothers.

Both the Levites and the Priests participated in the work (Neh. 3:17,22,28). We should not feign a piousness that precludes us from helping in the more mundane aspects of life. When necessary, the Apostle Paul labored with his own hands as a tentmaker (Acts 18:13); this was especially important in Corinth where he did not want to be chargeable to them, though he had a right to do so (2 Cor. 11:9; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8). There is, however, another aspect to this work of the priests and Levites that was even more important: they repaired “every one over against his house” (Neh. 3:28). While executing their priestly office in their service for the Lord, they did not neglect their homes. Sadly, there are multiple instances in Scripture of faithful men whose homes were not as they ought to have been before God: Eli (also a priest), Samuel, and David, are examples of this (1 Sam. 1:22-25; 8:3; 2 Sam. 23:5).

Baruch simply repaired “the other piece” (Neh. 3:20). There was nothing special about his section of the wall, and yet, he “earnestly repaired the wall.” How good to see one with a zeal for the Lord, no matter the task committed to him. In his case, it was a portion that Eliashib should have shown a greater interest in, as it bordered his house, but we don’t find Baruch complaining. We once again note that service within our own small sphere of responsibility may well prepare us for larger things. The office of a deacon may not seem very significant, but those who execute it well “purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13).

Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah are also to be noted: they repaired 1000 cubits of the wall — around 1460 feet! Let's not forget that the stones that made up these walls were huge blocks; this was a mammoth undertaking. Furthermore, it was not the most glamorous piece of wall; it stretched from the Valley gate unto the Dung gate.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 2:19-20, Mocked -

Sanballat and Tobiah's grief is turned to mocking laughter at the news. Geshem, the Arabian, joins them in their ridicule. Man in his enmity against God unites in his opposition. Was not the destruction of Jerusalem the ordered state of things? Did Nehemiah and his feeble band think to rebel against the King? Nehemiah again proclaims his faith in the God of heaven, the One who moved the king to grant him this commission, "He will prosper us" (Neh. 2:20). Nehemiah never directly addresses the accusation, "will ye rebel against the king?" (Neh. 2:19); though he could have produced evidence, he is not accountable to Sanballat, and he need not answer him. Many accusations are best left unanswered.

Faith brings confidence because it trusts in God and His word. As for Sanballat and his friends, "ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem" (Neh. 2:20). One thing that especially characterizes the book of Nehemiah is the separation of all things Jewish from that which is not. It is ever the effort of the enemy to weaken Christianity by diluting it with the things and principles of this world.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 2:17-18, Meeting With the Priests and Rulers -

With a clear sense of the ruin, Nehemiah now approaches the priests, nobles, and rulers. However, this was a work of God, and not one that required either the consent or the advice of those prominent in the community. He presents two things: firstly, an accurate depiction of the true state of things — "Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire" (Neh. 2:17) — and secondly, he exhorts them to build again the walls of the city so that they might no longer be a reproach. Not because of the strength that they possessed — the remnant had demonstrated how helpless they were — but rather, because the hand of God was with them. The king's authority is not overlooked; they were under Gentile rule, and all was done with the approval of that rule (Neh. 2:18).

"Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work" (Neh. 2:18). Sometimes it is necessary to rise up; to "lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees" (Heb. 12:12). Jude's letter, written in a day of apostasy, does not end in hopelessness, but rather, he encourages and exhorts: "Beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" (Jude 20-21). Sardis, which represents the final stages of Protestantism, is urged to "be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die" (Rev. 3:2). To throw up our hands in despair, even when all around us is in ruins, is a sign of faithlessness. It is good to see the response of the people; they strengthened their hands, recognizing that it was a good work — perhaps not glamorous, but certainly good because it was of God. Likewise, we are to "consider one another for provoking to love and good work ... encouraging one another" (Heb. 10:24-25 JND).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 2:11-16, A Survey of Jerusalem by Night -

After three days, without pomp or ceremony, Nehemiah takes a few men and surveys Jerusalem under the cover of night. No doubt the reasons were twofold: firstly, he did not want to arouse the opposition of the enemy, and secondly, he did not want to either excite or create fear in the hearts of the people. The remnant had lived under these deplorable circumstances and seemed resigned to them.

One can imagine being with Nehemiah on that night. It is dark; the scene is lit, perhaps by the moon, perhaps by lamps, but wherever we go, ruin is visible — great stones lie in the valleys, blackened pillars indicate where gates once stood. The walls of the city, designed to protect, are broken down. The gates which provided access are burnt with fire. When we arrive at the gate of the fountain and the King's pool, we do not find "a garden inclosed ... a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (Song of Sol. 4:12), but rather, the destruction is so great that the way is impassable.

The brighter the light shines on that dark night, the greater the exposé of the ruin. It is no different in our day; the brighter the light of the Word of God, the greater the evidence of the ruin. Whatever testimony there is to the true nature of the church, the great house character of Christendom will be more vividly highlighted. Many Christians are, sadly, indifferent to the state of things, or worse still, so blind that they actually believe that all is well: "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing" (Rev. 3:17).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 2:10, Sanballat the Horonite -

The journey to Jerusalem was, as far as we are told, uneventful. Letters from the king were given to the governors on the west side of the river and the travelers appeared to have encountered no outward opposition. This does not mean to say that others were happy about the arrival of Nehemiah and his company. Sanballat, the Horonite, and Tobiah, the Ammonite, are specifically mentioned; they were exceedingly grieved that anyone should think to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.

While it is possible that Sanballat was a Moabite, it is far more probable that he was a Samaritan governor. As such, he was a pretender to Judaism. Claiming to be a part of the family of Israel — "Art thou greater than our father Jacob" (John 4:12) — the Samaritans were as alien to the blessings of that nation as any Gentile (Eph. 2:12). Sadly, Christendom has many who claim to be a part of the family of God, and yet they are mere imitators. Like those encountered by Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, they outwardly identify with Christianity, but they have never

come to the cross; they do not know the cleansing power of the blood of Christ, neither do they possess a new nature, nor are they indwelt by the Spirit of God. With nothing but an outward show, they are very protective of their place and position and are naturally grieved when true-hearted servants of God show care for the spiritual welfare of the people of God.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 2:1-9, Artaxerxes' Commission -

Nehemiah's concern for that little remnant in Jerusalem, and the state of that city, was reflected in his countenance. It has been observed that facial expressions reveal the inward state of the soul, and furthermore, as humans, it is impossible to truly hide those feelings in our expressions. In Nehemiah's case, this was especially dangerous; one was not permitted to look downcast in the presence of a Persian king! "The king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid" (Neh. 2:2). Nevertheless, God used these circumstances to provide an opportunity for Nehemiah to reveal to the king the burden of his heart. "Why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?" (Neh. 2:3). When Artaxerxes' response proves favorable, Nehemiah immediately prays to the God of Heaven — the One who even now rules over the affairs of men. Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that "the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will ... after that thou shalt have known that the heavens do rule" (Dan. 4:25-26). Nehemiah, with spiritual discernment, correctly addresses the God of Heaven.

With his confidence placed in God, Nehemiah is not afraid to make an audacious request of the king — let me return to Jerusalem and rebuild it! When we ask according to the will of God, then there is no doubt as to God's answering our request. Since when did a cup bearer have the know-how to build a city, or to govern a province? Nehemiah is not the least bit daunted by the task that lay ahead; he trusted in God. The king, by way of reply, simply inquires as to how long Nehemiah would be absent.

In contrast to Ezra, Nehemiah asks for a safe passage through the various provinces. Ezra had told the king, "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him" (Ezra 8:22), and for that reason, he would not request a band of soldiers for protection (Neh. 2:9). Should we fault Nehemiah for his request? We each must walk in the measure of faith that we have; I cannot walk according to another man's faith — to do so would be mere pretension. One thing that characterized these men of faith is their lack of pretension. Nevertheless, one should never use this as an excuse for faithlessness — the attitude expressed in, "Oh, this is just the way I am." As we have noted, Nehemiah's bold request of the king was not itself without faith.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Nehemiah?s Prayer - Neh. 1:4-11

Nehemiah's response to the situation in Jerusalem was at the first weeping and mourning and then fasting and prayer (Neh. 1:4). He did not afflict himself to produce a certain state within, but rather, as a result of the deep sorrow he felt, he was afflicted; and, instead of being consumed by that sorrow, he commits his burden to God. "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray" (James 5:13).

As with Ezra, two things characterized Nehemiah's prayer: he vindicated God, and he made confession for sin. Too often we seek to find one upon whom we can cast blame — perhaps the feebleness of those at Jerusalem, or perhaps the king, or perhaps even God — anyone but ourselves. "I pray ... and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against Thee: both I and my father's house have sinned" (Neh. 1:6). Nehemiah, as Ezra before him, eats the sin offering. He so identifies with the sins of God's people that he views them as his own. We find the Lord Jesus likewise confesses Israel's sin as His own in the Psalms (Psa. 40:12; 69:5-6). However, whereas Ezra and Nehemiah suffered under the government of God because of Israel's sin, Christ alone could suffer for them, and He alone could restore that which He took not away (Psa. 69:4).

Nehemiah addresses God according to the revelation that he has: "O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and observe His commandments" (Neh. 1:5). This expression is similar to that which accompanies the giving of the Law — Nehemiah knew the Holy Scriptures, and it formed his very thoughts (Ex. 20:6; Deut. 5:10; 7:9). He was, however, in no position to cry Abba Father. Nehemiah knew that God was merciful and gracious and appealed to Him on that basis. However, he could not know that relationship into which we have been brought through the work of the Son of God (Gal. 4:5-6). Everything was seen through the covenant relationship that existed between God and Israel, a covenant that was conditional upon the keeping of the law — a covenant, we might add, which the people willingly and voluntarily entered (Ex. 19:58).

Nehemiah casts himself upon the mercy and promises of God: "But if ye turn unto Me, and keep My commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there" (Neh. 1:9; Deut. 30:15). For Nehemiah, the place where God had chosen to set His name never lost its significance. It was not good enough that there was a community of Jews in Babylon; it was to Jerusalem that Nehemiah looked. Likewise today, a community of Christians — a fellowship of believers — is a wonderful thing, but how much more wonderful to be gathered by the Spirit of God to His name. "For where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

Nehemiah also recognizes his dependence upon the King of Persia, a condition of things that had come about as a result of God's government upon Israel (Neh. 1:11). God had vested authority into the hand of the king; it was the times of the Gentiles, and it will remain so until the Gentile powers receive their ultimate judgment at the close of the Great Tribulation (Luke 21:24). To all this Nehemiah submits; however, before God, Artaxerxes is merely this man, "I pray Thee, Thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man" (Neh. 1:11).

Nehemiah's prayer was heard; nevertheless, it was not answered until three, perhaps four months later. God's timetable is often very different from our own.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 1:2-3, The Condition of Jerusalem -

When some of Nehemiah's brothers came to visit Nehemiah in the palace, he took the opportunity to inquire concerning those left of the captivity and of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:2). One might suppose that a man in such a position as he would have had little concern for the affairs of that poor and distant province of Palestine. Nehemiah, however, was not such a man; having enquired, he was deeply moved at the report (Neh. 1:4). "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire" (Neh. 1:3).

The walls of an ancient city provided protection, separating the inhabitants from the enemies without. The city gates allowed for controlled access. All who came and went were subjected to the appraisal of the gate keeper. The gate of a city was also the seat of judgment (Ruth 4). The heavenly Jerusalem is characterized by high walls and twelve pearl gates, each with its angelic keeper — it will be a city perfect in separation and perfect in administration (Rev. 21:12).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Nehemiah - Neh. 1:1

The book of Nehemiah is closely tied to the book of Ezra; in fact, the two form a single book in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thirteen years had passed since Ezra's return to Jerusalem and he was still to be found in that city (Ezra 7:7; Neh. 2:1; 8:1). The book of Nehemiah, however, opens in the courts of the palace at Shushan (in present day Iran) where we find Nehemiah, the cup-bearer, in the service of king Artaxerxes.

In comparing the individuals — Ezra and Nehemiah — we find them to be quite different in temperament. Ezra seems more subdued; he was the ready scribe and the priest of God. Ezra was sent to Jerusalem to restore things ecclesiastically. He was to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of God and to teach those that did not know it (Ezra 7:14,25). For this work, he was perfectly fitted. Nehemiah, on the other hand, was a man of action and, it would appear, a natural leader. His position in the court of the king may well have had some bearing on this. Often God uses seemingly insignificant circumstances in our lives to prepare us for greater things. In contrast with Ezra, Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem was connected with the restoration of the civil state of things. One should be careful in elevating the one over the other; each walked according to the measure of faith that they had received. Why was it necessary for God to send Nehemiah to Jerusalem when Ezra was already there? Had Ezra failed? No, each had a role that the other could not fulfill.

We should avoid ranking our brethren, and worse still, exalting ourselves. "For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Cor. 10:12).

It is human nature to delve into things that we have not seen and to promote one's sense of spirituality and superiority; but let us be clear, this is not of God. "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding the Head" (Col. 2:18-19). It was this very thing that led to the Gnostic errors that the Apostle John had to counter through his epistles late in his life. This is not to say that all believers are spiritually minded or that all exhibit the same degree of maturity. We see this clearly in the books we are presently considering. Those who made the sacrifice to leave Babylon and return to the land were exercised to do so. Some, however, seemed to be satisfied with merely being there — they were at God's center, were they not? Others, however, were willing to put their necks to the work, and of some we read, "they were counted faithful" (Neh. 13:13). Sad to say, there were also those for whom this place of privilege meant very little, and their behaviour only served to undermine that feeble testimony that God in His grace had permitted.

In the New Testament, James, Cephas, and John were conspicuous as being pillars in the assembly (Gal. 2:9). For one, however, to take a superior view of their position amongst their brethren, and to lord it over God's heritage, is condemned by the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:3). The Lord did not ask Peter to condescend to feed His sheep, but rather it was to flow from Peter's affection for Christ. Anything that exalts man, whether it is myself or another, detracts from Christ. "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 13:31, Remember Me -

Three times in this final chapter Nehemiah prays, "Remember me, O my God" (Neh. 13:14,22,31). Was Nehemiah afraid that his personal legacy would be forgotten? Were these words of self-importance? One could similarly ask how the Apostle Paul felt when he wrote, "all they which are in Asia be turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15), and, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me" (2 Tim. 4:10-11). Was Paul wallowing in self-pity? Far from it! Without a doubt, Paul was greatly saddened by these circumstances; nevertheless, he knew that all he had done of the Lord would stand the test of time — this he could confidently rest in, and so may we. "For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day" (2 Tim. 1:12). This was something that Nehemiah could only know in measure; even so, he, too, rests upon God. "Remember me, O my God, for good" (Neh. 13:31).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 13:23-31, Mixed Marriages -

The book of Nehemiah closes with Nehemiah once again having to address intermarriages. The people's indifference to separation was such that their unions with those of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab had resulted in households where the children could no longer speak fluent Hebrew. Surely this is no less an important lesson for us today. God calls friendship with the world adultery (James 4:4). Has our lack of separation resulted in households where our children walk and talk the language of the world? Appearing or sounding different may be hard for us all, but

it is especially so when we are young. Our children will not go beyond the example we set. It is our natural tendency to be drawn to those things that please the flesh. Worldliness has been Satan's most successful tactic in diluting the testimony of the church. Those natural desires within us, and Satan's temptations without are a deadly combination.

We don't, however, need to look for spiritual applications to this principle of an unequal yoke; the very thing itself is no more appropriate in Christianity than it was under law. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, says, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?" (2 Cor. 6:14-15). A marriage between a believer and unbeliever is never contemplated in Scripture. It may be that a partner is saved after marriage — this Paul addresses (1 Cor. 7) — but to deliberately enter such a union can only lead to unhappiness. Worse still, children that result from such a marriage are frequently stumbled by the parents' behavior — the unbelief on the one hand and the disobedience on the other. Such a marriage is a union of mixed principles (Amos 3:3).

In Nehemiah's day the unbelieving spouses turned aside their partners — it is no less the case in our day. To imagine that one is going to change the heart of a husband or wife after marriage is a foolish and dangerous thought. Such willfulness will yield the fruit of disobedience. If there is true repentance and humility, then it may be even as David said: "Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me ... ?" (2 Sam. 12:22). Solomon is presented as an example; there was no king like him. He was beloved of God, "but even him did foreign wives cause to sin" (Neh. 13:26 JND). We should not imagine that we are wiser than Solomon; worse yet, when we discount God's word, we act as if we are wiser than God.

In such matters, the assembly also bares a responsibility. A grandson of the high priest had married the daughter of Sanballat, the Horonite; therefore Nehemiah chased him away (Neh. 13:28). This man had no place in the priesthood. We also read, "Thus cleansed I them from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business" (Neh. 13:30). We do not call down fire upon the heads of those who bring defilement into the assembly, but it is necessary to pastor them, reprove, and, where necessary, deal with the sin.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 13:15-22, Profaning of the Sabbath -

The decline of that day was also reflected in the people's indifference to the Sabbath. This was one of the very things that they had vowed to keep (Neh. 10:31). Men carried on their commerce on the Sabbath as if it were no different from any other day of the week (Neh. 13:15-16). Once again, Nehemiah had to contend with the nobles of Judah, "What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the Sabbath day?" (Neh. 13:17). The Sabbath was given to Israel as a sign; they were to know that it was Jehovah who had chosen them and had separated them unto Himself. "Verily my Sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you" (Ex. 31:13). Without practical sanctification in the lives of these merchants, the outward sign of it held no special significance.

Nehemiah put an end to the Sabbath day abuses by shutting the city gates on Friday evening. There was, however, no change in the hearts of the merchants and sellers; they sat outside the city waiting for the gates to open. It was only when threatened by Nehemiah that they departed. Such is the heart of man — law can enforce an outward behavior but cannot change the inner man. Truly, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). It is impossible for a covenant to be established between God and man after the flesh; man can not enjoy God's rest. The Sabbath of the first creation was for man, and the only One who ever enjoyed all the rights of man according to God's counsels was Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28).

Nehemiah also commanded the Levites to cleanse themselves and keep the gates: "to sanctify the Sabbath day" (Neh. 13:22). The Sabbath was again to be a day holy unto Jehovah. There was an individual state commensurate with the enforcing of the Sabbath. There must be that practical sanctification in our lives, before we can give that which is God's its due place and character in our lives.

The Sabbath has not moved to the Lord's Day. We are not under a law binding us to a legal observance of a day of rest. However, the first day of the week — the resurrection day, the beginning of the new creation — is the Lord's Day. It was upon the first day of the week, "when the disciples came together to break bread" (Acts 20:7). The Apostle John "was in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10). Might it not be our desire to be found in like condition?

Mr. Darby wrote:

The Lord's day is a most precious gift from Him, and the true Christian enjoys it with all his heart; and, if he is faithful, he finds himself in the Spirit to enjoy God, happy to be freed from material labor to adore God as his Father, and to enjoy communion with the Lord. It is always a bad sign when a Christian talks of his liberty and makes use of it to neglect the Lord, in order to give himself to the material work of the world. However free a Christian may be, he is free from the world and from the law, in order to serve the Lord.

Paul in writing to the Romans speaks of our liberty in a rather remarkable way: "being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life" (Rom. 6:22). The bonds that hold us to Christ are stronger than any legal binding; they are the bonds of love.

Surely the merchandising of the Lord's Day is no less an indication of the complete indifference of Christians to the place the Lord should hold in our hearts. If it's the Lord's Day, then let it be His day.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 13:4-14, Eliashib and Tobiah -

The intermarriages extended to those in positions of responsibility, and that with the worst of their enemies. Tobiah, the Ammonite, was kinsman to Eliashib, the high priest (Neh. 13:4 JND), and his grandson was son-in-law to Sanballat (Neh. 13:28)! Rather than distancing himself from these unholy unions, Eliashib prepared for Tobiah a great chamber in the house of God where they had previously stored the

tithes and firstfruits (Neh. 13:5). It is little wonder that the people fell into sin — they were simply following Eliashib's example. The portion for the priests and the Levites was displaced by this worldly alliance; as a result, it was necessary for the Levites to leave the city and work in the fields (Neh. 13:10). So it is in Christendom today; union with the world — the advancing of social causes, political speeches from the pulpit, activism, all done in the name of Christianity — has displaced true worship and service for God.

No doubt it would have been argued then, as it is now, that an olive branch extended to one's enemy is a good thing. Righteousness and holiness are not, however, to be compromised in the name of peace; in fact, peace bought at such a price cannot last. Righteousness — obedience to the Word of God — is the true basis for peace. "Follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:22). "The work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever" (Isa. 32:17). "The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable" (James 3:17).

During this time, Nehemiah was absent from the city and everyone else appears to have been ignorant of, insensible to, or unable to address the presence of Tobiah in the temple. For the masses it may well have been convenient for the chamber to be occupied; if there was no place for tithes, then there was no need to tithe! Upon Nehemiah's return, Tobiah's belongings were cast out and the chambers cleansed. It wasn't enough to simply remove his stuff; there must be cleansing as well.

The rulers of Judah had to be challenged by Nehemiah concerning the neglect of the house of God. Tithing was restored, and Nehemiah appointed faithful men to be treasurers over the storehouses. As in Elijah's day, there appears to have been a silent, faithful remnant, the 7000 that had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). These are those who feared the Lord and spoke often one to another (Mal. 3:16). They are the Simeons and Annas of a latter day (Luke 2:25,36). Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, Pedaiah the Levite, and Hanan were found faithful to serve in the house of God. Irrespective of position, high or low, public or private, they were found faithful. No matter the circumstances of the day, we, too, can be found faithful in that small sphere of service that the Lord has given us. "His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matt. 25:21).

It is interesting to note that the expression house of God is especially characteristic of this post-captivity period. It is used frequently in the Books of the Chronicles, but not once in Kings. This would seem contrary to circumstances. In the Book of Kings the glory of the Lord filled the temple, but by the time of the captivity that glory had departed. There seems, however, to have been a special sensitivity among the faithful who had returned from the captivity; they recognized that the temple was owned by God as His house, despite the absence of the Shekinah glory, and that there was a conduct suited to it (John 2:16). This is very much the character of Paul's epistles to Timothy — behaviour in the house of God when things are both in order (1 Timothy) and in disorder (2 Timothy). Similarly, God's throne was no longer in Zion — not anywhere on earth for that matter — and yet God still governed morally, and required a certain conduct from that remnant who owned themselves to be His people.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 13:1-3, Ammonites and Moabites -

In reading the book of Moses, the people discovered that neither the Ammonite nor the Moabite should enter the congregation of God (Neh. 13:1). Israel was not to look favorably upon an Ammonite or a Moabite, despite their near kinship. They were strictly forbidden from entering the congregation (Deut. 23:36). In obedience, the mixed multitude was once again separated from Israel (Neh. 13:3). We also need constant reminding, through the Word of God, of the necessity to separate from those things contrary to it, whether it is the world or that which is within Christendom. While some may grudgingly admit that we should separate from gross worldliness, separation from those called Christians is often opposed. Let us again remind ourselves: "In a great house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also wooden and earthen; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If therefore one shall have purified himself from these, in separating himself from them, he shall be a vessel to honour, sanctified, serviceable to the Master, prepared for every good work" (2 Tim. 2:20-21 JND).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 12:27-47, The Dedication of the Wall -

The dedication of the wall was not required by law, but this time of thanksgiving and rejoicing was an appropriate response to all which had preceded. The dedication of the wall is presented morally as following upon the spiritual revival of the people and the repopulating of the city. As to whether chronologically this was so, it is not clear. However, as we find elsewhere in Scripture, God often chooses to present things in a moral order. If all their hopes had rested in the wall, that would have been a dangerous thing. First of all there had to be a work in the lives of the people, and then the wall took on the correct perspective; it could then be dedicated with thanksgiving and rejoicing, "for God" — not the wall — "had made them rejoice with great joy" (Neh. 12:43).

If we merely build walls in our lives, without the correct moral state within (individually or collectively), then the walls accomplish nothing — except to enclose an unsanctified people. This has been very evident with various cults exposed in the past several years. When, however, we are attracted to Christ, and there is a true work and exercise in the heart, then that clear separation that should exist between the people of God and this world ceases to be onerous and becomes something to be thankful for.

The order of purification is instructive — the priests and Levites first purified themselves, then the people, and then the wall (Neh. 12:30). Purifying of things will not make us pure (Mark 7:1-23). Furthermore, purification should be distinguished from the adherence to a ritual or dogma. That we should walk in the truth goes without saying (2 John 4), however, the heart and conscience must also be engaged — else there will not be purity. "The end of what is enjoined is love out of a pure heart and a good conscience and unfeigned faith" (1 Tim. 1:5 JND).

The priests had to wash their hands and their feet before entering the tabernacle of the congregation (Exod. 30:19-21). The hands of the Christian should always be holy (1 Tim. 2:8). The feet, however, must be washed (John 13:5-10). There are defilements that we come into contact with in our daily walk; these must be washed away with the water of the Word (Eph. 5:26). Christ as our Advocate (1 John 2:1) brings before us His Word (Luke 22:61); this leads to confession, repentance and cleansing (1 John 1:82:1).

Two companies encircled the city upon the wall. The first company, lead by Ezra the priest (Neh. 12:31-36), stood on the east side — perhaps adjacent to the temple. The second company stood opposite them with Nehemiah in the rear (Neh. 12:38). It might be supposed that Nehemiah, as governor of the city, would have taken the lead. The day, however, was not about personal honors. Indeed, no matter the office we may have been given of God in the assembly, such things have no relevance when it comes to worship, praise, and thanksgiving.

Trumpets were sounded and the singers sang loudly (Neh. 12:42). How pleasant singing is when it springs from a rejoicing heart. We do not need a choir to sing for us — that does not come from the heart, though granted, it may produce feelings in the heart. Our desire should be for that outward flow of praise to God. One may say, “I can’t sing in tune.” That does not matter to God; it merely says they sang loudly! Not once do we read of musical instruments accompanying worship in the New Testament. Such innovations are contrary to worship in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23). Instead, we are to “offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name” (Heb. 13:15). Likewise, anything in singing that draws attention to the singer is inconsistent with the spirit of worship.

The wives and children rejoiced also; so great was the rejoicing, that the joy was heard from a great distance (Neh. 12:43). We have rightly seen the family included throughout this revival. When Moses demanded of Pharaoh that he let God’s people go “with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds” (Ex. 10:9), Pharaoh offered him a compromise: “Not so: go now ye that are men, and serve the Lord” (Ex. 10:11). The world desires our children; it mocks the thought of holding a feast unto the Lord. In the communist states of Eastern Europe, children were told that Christianity was a crutch for the infirm and elderly, and that they did not need it. Things are not much different in the West today; the message is the same!

When Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh took their possessions on the east side of Jordan, in the land of Gilead, they were concerned that over time the children of the tribes from the west would say, “What have ye to do with the Lord God of Israel?” (Josh. 22:24). They had reason to be concerned; earlier in that same chapter we read that they “departed from the children of Israel out of Shiloh” (Josh. 22:9) — Shiloh, where the tabernacle had been pitched. The further we move away from God’s center, the colder our hearts grow. God would not have us leave our children in this world; He would have us bring them to Him; He would have them gathered about Himself (Mark 10:13-16).

To see the priests and Levites standing in their appointed place was also cause for rejoicing (Neh. 12:44). Likewise, to see the restoration of assembly order according to scriptural principles is an occasion for thanksgiving, not because of who we are, but because of the grace of God. We rejoice that “for a little space grace hath been shewed from the Lord our God … to give us a nail in His holy place” (Ezra 9:8). The singers and porters kept the ward of their God according to the commandment of David and of Solomon (Neh. 12:45). To repeat what has already been noted, this revival — and any revival, for that matter — is characterized by a returning to the old paths, in this case, especially that which was connected with the Temple and the restoration of godly worship (Neh. 12:46).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 11:4-12:26, Office and Gift -

Among the names and families listed, we find different offices fulfilled. There were overseers (Neh. 11:9,14,22). There were those that did the work of the house and those that did the outward work of the house (Neh. 11:12,16,22). Mattaniah, of the house of Asaph, led with thanksgiving in prayer (Neh. 11:17). The porters, Akkub, Talmon and their brethren, kept the gates (Neh. 11:19). Finally, Pethahiah represented the people before the King (Neh. 11:24). Similarly, in the assembly today there are different offices. “For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Rom. 12:45). Like a natural body, the church is composed of many members and no one member can replace another in service.

The Apostle Paul also speaks of gift: “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us” (Rom. 12:6). These are especially taken up in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12). Some gifts differ from our usual perception of a gift; we read of the gift of service, the gift of leading, the gift of helps, and the gift of governments. While office and gift are not to be confused, office is often accompanied by a prerequisite gift. However, whereas an office is confined to the local assembly, those gifts related to public ministry are given for the edification of the church as a whole. “He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-12). Though the foundation has been laid — the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the corner stone (Eph. 2:20) — evangelists, pastors, and teachers, continue to be raised up of the Lord for the edifying of the church as a whole.

When comparing the offices described in Nehemiah’s day with those of the present dispensation, a few remarks should be made. Even today there are men raised up of God to exercise oversight in the assembly; likewise, there are those who serve within the house of God: “the house of Stephanas … they have devoted themselves to the saints for service” (1 Cor. 16:15 JND). These are not appointed by individuals, the presbytery, or the assembly — but rather, they act as led by the Holy Spirit: “wherein the Holy Spirit has set you as overseers” (Acts 20:28 JND). In Paul’s first letter to Timothy, the characteristic qualities of those that desire to exercise oversight, or to serve, are presented in the third chapter.

In the assembly we also find those who are especially suited to the keeping of the gates; they have godly discernment to detect that which is contrary to the Word of God. On the other hand, whereas we read in Nehemiah of Mattaniah, from the musical family of Asaph, who began the thanksgiving in prayer, no such position exists today. All believers have the privilege of serving as priests; there is no office or gift for prayer or worship — there is no priestly caste. Instead we read, “yourselves also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5 JND). Drawing a different parallel, we can, however, be thankful for those singers who have the ability to raise and carry a tune — in spite of the best efforts of their less musical brethren!

In the case of Pethahiah, who advocated for the people before the king, it is the Lord Himself who now sits at the right hand of God representing His people. Nevertheless, there are individuals who have a special prayer ministry for the saints of God. “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God” (Col. 4:12). Intercession on behalf of the saints of God, and for all men, is a very important and overlooked aspect of prayer (1 Tim. 2:1).

As a final note, it is all very well to be thankful for the office fulfilled by others, but what of ourselves? Two attitudes can do much to weaken an assembly. The one is the individual who is envious of the function served by others and is constantly seeking to be recognized, “where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work” (James 3:16); the other is the person who fails to exercise their God-given function within the assembly.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 11:1-3, Jerusalem -

It might be supposed, that with the walls completed, the city of Jerusalem would have been repopulated. Nevertheless, as we observed earlier, “the city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded” (Neh. 7:4). It is interesting to note, that when taken captive, Judah sang, “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning” (Psa. 137:5). With the city itself still largely in ruins, there seems to have been little interest on the part of the general population to dwell within its precincts. However, having humbled themselves before Jehovah their God, and having been exercised by the Word of God, there seems to have been a change of heart. Although they were chosen by lot — ten percent of the population in all (Neh. 11:1) — rather than being a burden to those selected, there appears to have been a willingness to dwell in Jerusalem. “The people blessed all the men, that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem” (Neh. 11:2). It was, no doubt, quite a sacrifice to leave their fields and flocks, and perhaps, their ancestral villages, to dwell in Jerusalem. The cost, however, to these individuals and families seems to have paled in comparison to the blessing associated with dwelling in that “holy city” (Neh. 11:1).

Some have felt that those that went because of the lot, and those that went willingly, were two different groups. Perhaps this was so. It is a sad thing indeed, however, to think that some, who had been chosen for that privilege, may have taken their place reluctantly. Sadly, there are those that reluctantly accept their position in the assembly because it has been their lot in life — perhaps because of family ties. Unless the blessedness of the position is recognized — not because of who they are nor because they are with their brethren, but because they are gathered to the Lord’s name — their attitude and demeanor can be a serious drain on the assembly. Please note once again, it is not a question of whom we are gathered with, but rather whom we are gathered unto. Those gathered unto the Lord’s name are inconsequential, but surely there is blessing in being in the presence of the Lord.

The families of Judah and Benjamin that dwelt at Jerusalem are given, followed by the priests and the Levites. Those who dwelt in that holy city could establish their genealogy; without that, as we have spoken before, they had no right to be there.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 10:32-39, Tithing and Firstfruits -

Since the priests and Levites had no inheritance in the land, tithing was their provision (Num. 18:21). The first fruits of both field and flock were Jehovah’s. Even the firstborn son was His, for He had spared them when they were redeemed from Egypt (Ex. 13:2; Num. 8:17). Whereas the firstborn male of every animal was given up to Jehovah (Ex. 13:12; Ex. 34:19), the Levites stood before God in the place of the firstborn sons (Num. 8:18); nevertheless, every firstborn male child had to be redeemed (Ex. 13:13; 34:20). An ass could be redeemed with a lamb, and if not, its neck was to be broken (Ex. 13:13; 34:20).

In regard to the third part of a shekel (Neh. 10:32), though tithing is spelled out in the law, this particular levy had no legal statute. Nevertheless, their desire to use this money for the showbread and the prescribed offerings shows spiritual intelligence (Neh. 10:33). Twelve loaves made up the showbread; the remnant stood before God as the 12 tribes of Israel, and not simply as those tribes present (which was almost exclusively Judah). Each tribe was thus represented in the showbread, though not present in person.

Tithing ten percent, or of any other percentage, was never prescribed for the church. All such teaching takes what was applicable under law and misapplies it to Christianity. Nevertheless, we certainly do read of gifts given. Paul touches on this in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 8). It is remarkable that the word used for “gift” throughout this eighth chapter is actually “grace.” This marks the difference between what we find in the Old Testament and what we have in the New. Our giving should neither be compelled by law, nor should it be limited by law. Rather, under grace there should be no limit; our giving should flow from the grace with which we have been blessed.

Tithing, however, wasn’t simply to provide for the Levites, nor for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow; it was first of all an act of worship and thanksgiving (Deut. 26:10-11). Likewise, when we come to the place of God’s appointment to offer up praise and worship, it should be with thankful hearts and baskets full. “Thou shalt take of the first of all the fruit of the earth, which thou shalt bring of thy land that the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt put it in a basket, and shalt go unto the place which the Lord thy God shall choose to place His name there . ... And thou shalt set it before the Lord thy God, and worship before the Lord thy God . ... When thou hast made an end of tithing all the tithes of thine increase the third year, which is the year of tithing, and hast given it unto the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within thy gates, and be filled” (Deut. 26:2,10,12).

The order given in Hebrews corresponds to the order we find in Deuteronomy; that which is God-ward comes first, and then we have that which is man-ward. “Let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb. 13:15-16).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 10:28, Separation -

For the Israelite, separation from the nations was right and proper. However, concerning this matter we read: they “separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God” (Neh. 10:28). It is human to approach things in this manner, and consequently, it must end in failure. When we get to the final chapter of this book we shall see this very thing. I don’t mean to suggest that the people had not been

exercised by the law of Jehovah, but it will not work when we attempt to separate from, so that we might turn to God. Rather, a turning to God will, of necessity, result in a turning from all that is contrary to Him. The saints at Thessalonika “turned to God from idols” (1 Thess. 1:9) — they didn’t turn from idols to serve God. The Nazarite was to separate himself unto the Lord (Num. 6:2); the consequences of that separation follow (Num. 6:39). Many an unbeliever has tried to separate themselves from this world and the sin that characterizes it, hoping to turn to God, only to fail. Whether in salvation or our walk, it is first submission to God, and then as a consequence, we will have the power to turn from those things that defile.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Neh. 10:1-39, Entering Into a Curse -

In Exodus, the people responded to the giving of the law with “all that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8). God in His sovereignty had chosen Israel, and it was through His grace that He delivered them from Egypt — “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto Myself” (Ex. 19:4) — and yet, the children of Israel voluntarily set themselves under God’s “right judgments, and true laws, good statutes and commandments” (Neh. 9:13). Now, a thousand years later, having recognized that they had not heeded those commandments, this remnant again binds itself under a curse to keep them. Although the people understood that they had failed to keep the law, they did not recognize that the natural man was incapable of keeping God’s holy and just laws. The problem is not with the law, it is with us. “The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good...but I am carnal, sold under sin” (Rom. 7:12,14).

This was not the first time that the people had rededicated themselves to the law. At the end of the book of Joshua, Joshua tells the people “Ye cannot serve the Lord: for He is an holy God; He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins” (Josh. 24:19). The people, however, respond with “nay; but we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:21). Even as they spoke, they had already failed, for Joshua says, “Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the Lord God of Israel” (Josh. 24:23). Nevertheless, “the people said unto Joshua, the Lord our God will we serve, and His voice will we obey. So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem” (Josh. 24:24-25).

Before entering into their covenant, the remnant separated from those of other nations that were there in the land. This, as has been noted, was a good thing — they were called upon to be a separate people, holy unto God. However, just like Israel in Joshua’s day, we find the people in violation of their own oath before they even enter into it!

“They ... entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God’s law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His judgments and His statutes” (Neh. 10:29). Three things are spelled out; three things that they had clearly failed in:

Separation: “We would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons” (Neh. 10:30).

Honoring Jehovah’s sabbaths: “We would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt” (Neh. 10:31).

Tithing and firstfruits: “We made ordinances for us, to charge ourselves yearly with the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God” (Neh. 10:32).

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