

# **Effective Christian Living**

## **The Book of Nehemiah**

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## Chapter 1

Nehemiah was a great man of God and his life reveals to us all the ingredients for living effectively for the Lord. In these studies we will discover that we need to make a mark for Christ where we live, just as Nehemiah did.

Nehemiah was the son of Hachaliah. The nation of Israel to which he belonged had been in captivity in Babylon for seventy years, but now things had changed. The Persians had defeated the Babylonians and the Persian King Cyrus had allowed them to return to their homeland. The Jews returned in stages. The first return was led by Zerubbabel in 538 B.C., the second was led by Ezra in 457 B.C., and the third led by Nehemiah in 444 B.C.

Before his return to Jerusalem Nehemiah was employed in the service of King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was based in Shushan, Persia, which was the royal palace and winter residence of the Persian Kings. He tells us his employment in chapter 1 verse 11, where he says, "I was cup-bearer to the king." This was a position of trust, honour and influence. Nehemiah was in the right place at the right time. In His providence God had placed him there so that he would be in the best position to serve Him and to be used in His purposes.

You are not where you are by accident. The scripture tells us in Proverbs 16 verse 9, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps". God has put you where you are for you to serve Him and witness for Him to those around you. God wants you to shine for Him in your village or town, and amongst your relatives, neighbours and friends. The Lord Jesus says in Matthew 5 verse 16 "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven".

Nehemiah's effectiveness lay in the great concern he had for seeing the city of Jerusalem flourish. He was concerned about the people of God. Nehemiah 1 verse 3 tells us they were in "great trouble and disgrace". Those who had already returned to Jerusalem faced opposition and had become cast down. Nehemiah was concerned for their happiness and well-being. We too must have a loving concern for fellow believers. This will produce a strong church creating a real impact upon the world.

Nehemiah was concerned about the work of God. In chapter 1 verse 2 he is told that, "the wall of Jerusalem is also broken down". This was how the wall was left when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar took the Jews captive some seventy years before. The city of God was in disrepair and in a bad condition. Nehemiah's concern forced him to take action and do something about it.

Effective Christians are those who have a zeal for the house of God. The wall of prayer may be broken down. You will be determined to encourage its restoration. The wall of devotion and service for Christ may be in a weak condition. You will be burdened to see it built up again. Be watchful and prayerful over your own life and the lives of others. Whenever you see decline be ready to do something about it through prayer, encouragement and action.

Nehemiah's response is a worthy one and it reveals the key to experiencing the Lord's blessing which brings good success in Christian living and in the work of God. In verse 4 he says, "I sat down and wept". This is the way to blessing and restoration when the work of God is in decline. When was the last time we wept over the lost condition of sinners and

weaknesses of the Church? Jeremiah is known as the weeping Prophet. He broke his heart over the sins of the nation of Israel. In Jeremiah 9 verse 1 he says that his eyes were like a "fountain of tears". Jesus wept over Jerusalem. We read in Luke 19 verse 41, "As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city He wept over it". This was because of their rejection of His love toward them. God will not ignore a broken and contrite heart. Do we shed tears because of the immensity of the burden on our hearts for God's work and its success? Nehemiah tells us that "for some days I mourned". Effectiveness is borne out of us telling deeply the need around us. Our grief will move us to reach out to those in need and to minister to them.

In the same verse Nehemiah says he "Fasted and prayed before the God of Heaven". Our effectiveness personally and as a church is determined by our prayer life. There is always the danger of assuming that we need new novelties to get the blessing of God. There is a seminar or conference for just about everything in Christian work. That is all right in its place, but nothing is as effective as believers who are committed to seeking God's face.

The way we pray is important too. Nehemiah shows us the type of prayer that is effective with God. There is recognition of the greatness of God. Nehemiah addresses God in verse 5 as "The great and awesome God". We must remember our place before His almightiness. We come to one who is indeed our Heavenly Father, but He is also the King of kings. There is a real humility as he pleads with the Lord to hear. In verse 6 he says, "let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant is praying". We are servants of the Lord. He is our Master. We submit our wills to His and humbly depend upon Him.

We find confession of sin as he approaches God. In verse 6 he says, "We have acted very wickedly toward you". We cannot begin to be effective as believers if we have unconfessed sin in our lives. David realised this when he said in Psalm 66 verse 18, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."

In verses 8 and 9 Nehemiah uses scripture and reminds God of His promises,

"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses". God will honour His own word and cannot deny it. It is good to employ the Bible in our conversation with the Lord. The Apostle Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 1 verse 20, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ."

Nehemiah reminds God of the redeemed position of His people in verse 10 of this chapter, "They are your servants and your people whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand". We belong to God. He listens and takes note of our requests. Israel experienced this in Egypt. We read in Exodus 2 verse 24, "God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant".

There was a definite request made by Nehemiah in verse 10, "Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man".

Never be fearful in approaching God and making your requests known. Whatever your need, state it before your heavenly Father. Paul teaches us in Philippians 4 verse 6, "Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God". Because of these things Nehemiah experienced God's blessing and saw the work of God prosper.

## Chapter 2

The events of chapter 2 of the book of Nehemiah take place six months after the end of chapter one. It is now the month of Nisan, or April. Nehemiah's heart had been heavy during those months. The King noticed Nehemiah's sad face. He asks in verse 21 "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart" Nehemiah was afraid because it was against the laws of Persia to appear in the presence of the King with a sad face.

Nehemiah unburdens his heart. He tells the King of the ruined state of his home city Jerusalem. He says in verse 3, "The city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire". The healthy progress of God's work should be an issue close to our hearts. It is natural for the believer to be sad when he sees that work struggling and neglected. Haggai the Prophet felt the same way years earlier. He saw the temple in ruins while the people of God modernised their own homes. In Haggai 1 verse 3 he said, "Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains in ruins?" And in verse 7, "Give careful thought to your ways". We'll never be effective in our Christian living if there is a cold indifference to the spiritual condition of our own hearts, and a loss of concern for the well-being of the cause of the Gospel.

King Artaxerxes was sympathetic. In verse 4 he asked, "What is it you want?" And so we read that Nehemiah "prayed to the God of Heaven". Be encouraged to seek the face of God anywhere. God isn't restricted by time and place. Nehemiah needed urgent direction from God. He prayed where he was. It's right to pray in church and in fellowship with God's people. There are times when you can't. Nehemiah prayed while he was doing his normal job as the king's cup-bearer. God is still in the kitchen, the school or college, and in the place of work. God is always near to hear. David said in Psalm 102 verse 7, "He will respond to the prayer of the destitute; He will not despise their plea".

For what did Nehemiah pray? I'm sure he asked God for wisdom to choose the right words to say to this powerful king. We call this prayer of Nehemiah's an "arrow prayer". He just shot it up to heaven right where he was. His prayer was short and to the point. The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 6 verse 7, "When you pray, do not keep babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words". The Lord delights to hear the short, urgent, heartfelt cry of His needy people. David said in Psalm 55 verse 22, "Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall".

Although Nehemiah saw the importance of prayer, he also saw the need for practical action. Nehemiah makes a request. He asks permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. It is good to pray but prayer isn't a replacement for action. The king agrees to let Nehemiah go. He provides him with a letter to give to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest to provide him with timber for the repair work. In all these practical matters Nehemiah recognised the hand of God. He says in verse 8, "Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests". God is active in all the down to earth issues of His children. He is always concerned to meet your practical needs. Nehemiah referred to God as "MY God". God was his reason for living and his number one concern and priority.

Jesus has promised to meet the needs of all those who put Him first. He said in Matthew 6 verse 33, "Seek first His kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well". He referred in the previous verses to all the things we need for practical daily living such as food and clothing. Always acknowledge God in all your ways. Praise him for every evidence of His love and care toward you.

In verse 10 of this chapter we meet with Sanballet the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official. We read, "They were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites". These two men were to become a real thorn in the side of Nehemiah. When you get down to prayer and action for the cause of God's Kingdom you can expect opposition to follow. The Apostle Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3 verse 12, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse". This was to become Nehemiah's experience. He was not going to be put off, nor should we. Nehemiah got on with the job he had come to do.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, faced opposition when he preached in the open air. He describes it to us, "Many of the people acted like beasts and did their best to disturb the meeting. They tried to drive a herd of cows into the crowd, but without success. Then they began to throw stones, showers of them. One of them struck me between the eyes. I wiped away the blood, and went right on". He "went right on". Let's have that same persistence as we meet opposition in the work of the King of kings.

Before Nehemiah could set about the work, he needed to know the true state of things. In verse 11 he tells us that "I set out during the night with a few men". The idea was to examine the walls and to determine the extent of the damage. Once he'd achieved this he was in a better position to know what to do. Following his thorough investigation he exhorts the people in verse 17, "Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem". You can only pray specific direction on solving the problem when you know what the problem is. Seek to be a perceptive and discerning Christian; know the signs of the times; know the need of the hour, and then get on with being the solution to the problem. Encourage others to get the same vision for the strengthening of the work and to join you in it as Nehemiah did.

In the beginning Nehemiah faced ridicule. In verse 19 we read that Sanballet, Tobiah and Geshem the Arab, "mocked and ridiculed us". How do we respond when we face mockery? Nehemiah continued to trust the Lord. In verse 20 he replied to those who ridiculed his work, "The God of heaven will give us success. We His servants will start building". Nehemiah knew that he was doing the right thing in the sight of the Lord. Therefore, it is of no importance what the world may think. If you are seeking to serve the Lord Jesus Christ then your goal in life couldn't be better. Let no one distract you from it.

Follow the exhortation of the writer of the Hebrews when he says in Chapter 12 verse 2, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith". Nehemiah focused on nothing else but seeing the Lord glorified and His work prosper.

## Chapter 3

You will remember that Nehemiah chapter two ended with Nehemiah exhorting the people to build the walls of Jerusalem. The people responded with enthusiasm. "Let us start rebuilding", they said. We now look at chapter three. We see God's people getting down to work. The well-known Bible commentator Matthew Henry said, "Saying and doing are often two things. Many say and sit still and do nothing. These were none of those".

Chapter 3 contains the names of people involved in the work and the jobs they did. The work of the Kingdom always requires workers. The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 9 verse 38, "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field". Nehemiah had many willing workers. Are you involved in the work of the Kingdom? Have you said with Isaiah, "Here am I. Send me?" The work of building up the Church will be hindered unless the people of God are committed to it.

The workers came from all walks of life. Verse 1 refers to Priests, verse 8 to goldsmiths and perfumers, verse 12 to rulers, verse 17 to the Levites, verse 32 to merchants. No one considered their position too high or too low to involve themselves in the building work. You might feel insignificant in the eyes of the world but God has a job for you to do for Him. Indeed, the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1 verse 27-28, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, God chose the weak things to shame the strong". God is not looking for status and position before He can use you. He is looking for an obedient and willing heart.

We know that the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt successfully. This was because of the united effort of all who were involved. The Psalmist said in Psalm 133, "How good and how pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity for there the Lord bestows His blessing". Here in chapter three we see a united, whole-hearted effort to see God's work prosper and His people encouraged. The Lord blessed this work. He did so because there was a unity of purpose. Everyone had one main objective, to build the wall. They had purposed in their heart that nothing would hinder it. Christians will not fall out with one another when they are focused on the same goals. Our duty is to build up not pull down.

The word 'repair' used in this chapter translates a Hebrew word meaning 'to strengthen'. Our aim as Christian workers is to strengthen the work of God. Beware of weakening the work by neglect and discord. Paul prays in Colossians 1 verse 11, "Being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience". Endurance and patience are two vital qualities in the building up of God's work. We are called to be repairers of the breach. God said through Isaiah 58 verse 12, "Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called the repairer of broken walls, restorer of streets and dwellings". Does your presence in your church fellowship bring blessing, encouragement and healing? Your involvement in the life and witness of your local church should work toward building it up and the strengthening of unity.

There was unity of heart among the people. Throughout chapter three we read the expression, "Next to him". See how many times you can spot this. The people of God stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder in the work. Each one was in his place. Each one was

doing his bit. No one was pulling in a different direction. Had they done so the work would have floundered in disarray. Stand next to your brother and sister in Christ. Don't spend your time looking for their faults. Avoid a critical attitude. Stand together supporting each other as you work for the common good of the furtherance of the gospel.

In verses 10, 28, and 29, we read of some who "made repairs opposite his house". They were concerned to get their own house in order before looking at the state of the houses of others. The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 7 verse 3-5, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye". The writer to the Hebrews said in chapter 13 verse 1, "Keep on loving each other and forgiving each other as God in Christ has forgiven you." Get on with your fellow believers in your church. Work together toward its growth. There was unity of purpose among the people. Their chief goal was the building of the wall and its completion. Keep your focus on what you are seeking to achieve for the glory of God. The Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 4 verse 7, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith".

In Nehemiah 3 verse 5 we read, "But their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors". Sadly there will always be those in the fellowship who shirk their responsibilities in the work of God. Be sure you are not dead wood in your church. Someone once said, "It is better to wear out than rust out". Others went beyond their duty. In verse 4 we read of Meremoth who made repairs. In verse 21 we see that he repaired another section. We notice the same thing of the Tekoites in verses 5 and 27. Having zeal for God that when you've completed your task you still look for further opportunities to do more for the Lord you love. There is always something to be done in your church for God. Paul recommends Epaphras in Colossians 4 verse 13, "I vouch for him that he is working hard for you".

The Tekoites mentioned in Nehemiah 3 verse 5 were not put off by the indifference of their nobles. They continued to repair their section of the walls. What we do has an effect on others. Inactivity of some has the potential for discouraging others. The work load falls on a few and the pressure can be great. By your non-involvement in the work you can so easily become a source of discouragement to other believers who desire to work for God. We need to be like Baruch mentioned in verse 20 who, "zealously repaired another section". We must work for God with zeal and determination.

Nehemiah chapter three is a challenge to us all to be men and women of action. Paul exhorts us in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 58, "Therefore my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain".

## Chapter 4

We turn our attention now to Nehemiah chapter four. This chapter reveals to us some important principles of spiritual warfare. Behind all opposition to the work of the Lord lies Satan. He is our main adversary. We read in Ephesians 6 verse 12, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms". The Apostle Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 5 verse 8, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the Devil prowls around like a lion looking for someone to devour".

Nehemiah faced the growing opposition of Sanballet and Tobiah. In verse 1 they seek to undermine and ridicule Gods people. They said, "What are these feeble Jews doing?" Satan will draw our attention to our weaknesses. He hopes that we will feel incompetent and give up the challenge of serving the Lord in a hostile world. Remember, our sufficiency is in the Lord. On our own we can achieve nothing. Paul the Apostle tells us in 2 Corinthians 3 verse 5, "Our competence comes from God". In 2 Corinthians 12 verses 9 to 10, the Lord says "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". So Paul concludes, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. For when I am weak, then I am strong".

The first principle of spiritual warfare is total dependence on God for the success of your work for Him. When God works through our weaknesses He receives all the glory for all that is accomplished. You also find your strength in Him to face all the onslaught of the enemy. The scripture teaches, in 1 Corinthians 1 verse 27, "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong". Are you facing hardships and persecutions for the sake of the Gospel? Do you feel insignificant and weak? Don't lose heart! You're actually in the best position for being of great use in the service of God. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 4 verse 4, "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you".

The second principle of spiritual warfare is prayer. Nehemiah mentions prayer in verses 4 and 9. You may feel that Nehemiah's prayer is somewhat unkind and even unloving. He says in verse 4, "Turn their insults back on their heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity". There is no doubt that we must pray for God to save those who persecute us. There is also a time to hand over to God in prayer those who persist in defiant opposition to God's cause. David prayed in a similar tone in Psalm 139. 21-22, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? I count them enemies". This may seem strange language for a prayer but David's concern was for the glory of God.

Jesus taught us in Luke 6 verse 27-28, "Love your enemies, pray for those who mistreat you". We have His own example on the cross in Luke 23 verse 34. He said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing." The Lord Jesus also spoke with equal clarity about judging those who refuse the invitation of His love. He said in Matthew 23 verse 33, "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" How should this effect your prayers? Certainly pray for the salvation of all men. Pray that men and woman will be saved from their sin and rebellion to God. If it becomes necessary pray that they might be overthrown by a divine intervention on your behalf, so that the cause of

the Gospel may prosper and not be hindered. In praying like that you are on the offensive against Satan and his tactics. This is part of the spiritual weaponry we may use in the battle of the Lord.

The third principle of spiritual warfare is determination. We read in verse 6, "The people worked with all their heart". The enemies of the Gospel will not find it easy to weaken the resolve of a determined Christian. Satan isn't bothered about a sluggish Christian. He doesn't see him as a threat. A keen believer is another thing. You can expect a battle on your hands when you seek to serve the Lord with enthusiasm. It's good to be whole-hearted in your devotion to Jesus Christ and his work. The scripture encourages in Galatians 6 verse 9, "Let us not be weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up".

A fourth principle of spiritual warfare is remembering the greatness of your God. In verse 13 Nehemiah says, "Remember the Lord who is great and awesome". Satan will attempt to make the enemy look powerful and menacing. Maybe you're feeling overwhelmed by the opposition of family and friends to your Christian living. The Jews were getting discouraged. They said in verse 10, "The strength of the labourers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot build the wall". Does the task of serving God where you are seem large and foreboding? God is bigger than all your problems. If the enemy seems powerful and great, God is more powerful and greater still. The Apostle John says in 1 John 4 verse 4, "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world". When your work for God appears daunting remember the Lord. He promises to be with you as your helper. In Hebrews chapter 13 and verses 5 and 6 we read, "God has said, Never will I leave you never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence the Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Another important principle of spiritual warfare is watchfulness. Nehemiah was aware that the enemy would attack at any time. They had threatened in verse 11, "We will kill them and put an end to the work". This is always Satan's objective. How did Nehemiah respond? Verse 13 says that he, "Stationed some of the people at exposed places with their swords". They were on the alert. Jesus said in Matthew 26 verse 41, "Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation". We must not leave any exposed areas so that Satan can gain entrance into our lives and spoil our work and ruin our testimony.

Each man was equipped with his sword. He was ready to use it. In verse 18, we are told, "And each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked". The principle of spiritual warfare here is the importance of holding onto and using the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. Be familiar with scripture. Jesus used the scripture when He was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. In Matthew 4 verses 4, 7, and 10, He said, "It is written" and quoted from the scriptures. As Martin Luther wrote in his hymn "A word will quickly slay him".

The last principle I want you to notice is sacrifice. In verse 23 Nehemiah tells us, "Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards took off our clothes". They sacrificed their own comforts so that the work of God would continue. C T Studd a famous missionary, once said, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him". May we put these principles of spiritual warfare into practice and see the enemy overcome and the work of God's kingdom flourish.

## Chapter 5

The fifth chapter of Nehemiah reveals to us another strategy of Satan in his attempt to destroy the work of God. In the previous chapter we saw that he uses the direct opposition of God's enemies. There was psychological warfare as he ridiculed the effort of the Jews in their attempt to rebuild the walls. He employed physical threats to unnerve the workers. The opponents said in chapter 4 verse 11, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them". In all this Satan was unsuccessful. Nehemiah knew the strategy. The enemy of our souls never tires in his efforts to wear us down and frustrate us.

What is his technique here in chapter 5? His attack from outside failed, so he tries to work from inside the people of God. There is discord and division within the ranks. God's people fighting among themselves. They complain about three things. They need to go into the fields and harvest. They said in verse 2, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain" Others said in verse three, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine". They did this to raise money to buy seed-corn. Now they were near to being ruined. Still others complained in verse 5, "We have subjected our sons and daughters to slavery - we are powerless, because our fields and vineyards belong to others".

Nehemiah recognised that these complaints weren't directed to him personally. Verse 1 tells us, "Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers". The wealthy nobles and officials who had lent their fellow brothers and sisters' money were now taking their land and property. They were happily taking their sons and daughters and making them slaves. This was a callous, cold hearted treatment of their neighbours. They were all the people of the Lord and objects of His love and care.

The basic problem here was the sin of lovelessness. God had called the nation to the principle of love of your neighbour. We read in Leviticus Chapter 19 verse 18, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord". The standard is still the same for you and your church. The Lord Jesus says in John 15 verse 12, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you". God's command to love was being ignored. There was sin in the camp. It had potential to destroy the work of God.

Sin among the people of God can be devastating. In Joshua chapter 7 we read of the sin of Achan. Israel was forbidden to take the devoted things when they conquered the city of Jericho. Achan disobeyed. When Israel went out to do battle against the city of Ai they were defeated. They wondered why. God told them in verse 11, "Israel has sinned - They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen; they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies". This is why Satan tempts us to sin and manipulates our sinful responses. He wants to render you as ineffective as possible. He wants to weaken the witness of the Church as much as he can. He knows that nothing is as successful as creating discord, disunity, and division. He still operates on the principle of divide and conquer. A complaining, divided church lacks credibility to the outsider looking in.

Nehemiah says in verse 9, "Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?" There is nothing as ugly and unattractive as sin in the church exposed to an onlooking world. Indeed, the enemies of the Gospel are looking for every opportunity to discredit Christians. If they can they will. Don't give them the opportunity. Love one another. Don't be cold and unkind to each other. The scripture says in Galatians 6 verse 2, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ". Demonstrate real Christian love in you fellowship. Let the world see the reality of the love of Christ in your lives. The Lord Jesus said in John 13 verse 34, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another". Do this and Satan will never be successful in ruining your work and witness for the Lord.

What is the solution to the problem of sin among God's people? Nehemiah said in verse 6, "When I heard their outcry, I was angry". There is a place for righteous anger. The Lord Jesus was angry when He saw the money-changers in the Temple and he overthrew their tables. The glory of God was threatened. It is never right to turn a blind eye to sin. There should always be a positive response to it. Nehemiah's anger moved him to do something to resolve the problem. Righteous anger is not losing your cool! It will always lead to dealing with the sin so that God's name is honoured and His work strengthened.

The sin that is badly affecting God's work must be identified and addressed. Nehemiah assessed the complaints and what prompted them. He said in verse 7, "I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials". Paul says in Ephesians 5 verse 11, "Have nothing to do with the fruitless works of darkness, but rather expose them". Whatever is the cause of discord, division, and disunity amongst God's people it must be attended to in brotherly love. Sin must be seen for what it is. No excuse for it is justified. Nehemiah states clearly to the offenders in verse 9, "What you are doing is not right". There should be regret and a change of attitude. The nobles said in verse 12, "We will give it back, and we will not demand any more from them". Stop sinning, change direction, and do what God asks of you. Acknowledge your own failings.

Following the example of godly leaders will keep you on the right road. Nehemiah says to the offenders in verse 10, "I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop". It's clear Nehemiah refused to place the people under an unbearable load himself. He says in verse 15, "The earlier governors, those preceding me, placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine but our of reverence for God I did not act like that". Nehemiah didn't contribute in any way to the discord and ill-feeling among the Jews. In Hebrews 13 verse 7 we read, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith".

The result of new dedication to the Lord is unity and praise. In verse 13 we read, "The whole assembly said 'Amen', and praised the Lord". The work of the Gospel will flourish when God's people are wholly united in serving Him. Rather than complaints, murmuring and discord, there will be praise to God for all the great things He has done.

## Chapter 6

The key verse of chapter 6 of Nehemiah is verse 3. Nehemiah says, "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should this work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" The key words in this verse are, "Why should the work stop?" Once again we see the desire of Satan. He wants to stop the progress of the work of God and God's people. In chapter 4 he tried outward opposition. He failed. In chapter 5 he tried again to stir up division and discord within the ranks of God's people. He failed again.

In chapter 6 we see Satan at his most devious. His technique is subtle craftiness. Martin Luther, the great reformer, recognised this aspect of Satan's activity. In his hymn 'A safe stronghold our God is still' he says in the first verse, 'Strong mail of craft and power he weareth in this hour'. When Satan fails to bring you down through open attack against your soul, he resorts to 'playing dirty'. The Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2 verse 11, "We are not ignorant of his schemes". In Ephesians 6 verse 11 he says, "Put on the whole armour of God so that you can take your stand against the Devil's schemes". Nehemiah chapter 6 exposes some of those schemes. Knowing how he works will help us to stand firm and continue serving the Lord.

When Nehemiah said in verse 3, "Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" He was responding to an invitation from Sanballet and Tobiah to meet with them and talk. You'll remember that these two men are enemies of God's work. Now they appear friendly. They said in verse 2, "Come let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono". This would be seen to be a neutral position. Ono was near Joppa, between Ashdod and Samaria, outside the borders of Judah. Their real reason for this summit meeting was to kill Nehemiah. Nehemiah discerned this. He said at the end of verse 2, "But they were scheming to harm me".

If Satan cannot overthrow the work, or divide and conquer it, he will try to side track you. He will attempt to distract you. Our priority is to be about God's work and to finish whatever He has called you to do. Don't be diverted from it by useless side issues. As genuine as this invitation sounded, and appealing as it seemed, attending the meeting would have slowed God's work. With the leader off the scene morale would drop, and the building work would gradually come to a halt. The danger always exists of talking about God's work, meeting for seminars and conferences about God's work. That is fine, as long as we actually go and do God's work in the end. Satan isn't concerned until we put our hands to the plough. Talkers are no threat to him. Doers are!

The enemy is relentless in applying pressure. We read in verse 4, "Four times they sent me the same message". You must be just as relentless in your determination to be faithful to God in your service.

The second technique of the enemy is slander. In verses 5 to 9 Sanballet sent a letter in which he insinuated that Nehemiah had ulterior motives for his zeal in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. It was implied that Nehemiah was guilty of treason. In verse 6 we read, "You and the Jews are plotting to revolt". Also it was suggested that Nehemiah wanted to become King. The letter continued in verse 6, "According to these reports you are about to become King". Of course, if this got back to King Artaxerxes in Persia, Nehemiah would be in

trouble. This concerned him. Spreading false rumours and slander is detrimental to work of God.

Opponents of the Gospel will look for opportunities to throw Christians into a bad light to discredit their motives and aims. You will be falsely accused from time to time. Some will imply you are only out for money, or personal gain. Others might accuse you of being a fanatical fundamentalist trying to take over the world! Of course, you must be careful not to give the wrong impressions through lack of care and wisdom. The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 5 verse 11-12, "Blessed are you when people insult you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you".

Nehemiah dealt with the false accusations by an honest denial, and by committing the matter to the Lord in prayer. The pressure was intense. The enemy tried to frighten the workers. Nehemiah's answer is in verse 9, "But I prayed, now strengthen my hands". Learn to take all your troubles to the Lord in prayer and leave them with Him.

We find another scheme of the enemy in verses 10 to 14. Nehemiah thought he had a trusted friend in Shemiah the prophet. Shemiah warned Nehemiah of an attempt against his life. He said in verse 10, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you". Nehemiah refused for two reasons.

First, his leadership would be discredited. The Jews would believe him to be selfish coward concerned for his well-being. He said in verse 11, "Should a man like me run away?" He was their leader and protector. Nehemiah's safety was in God. You need not run away and hide from the enemies of the Gospel. Be like Nehemiah, pray for God to strengthen you. Remember God's word. David said in Psalm 46 verse 1, "God is our refuge and strength, and ever present help in trouble". Your life will have an impact on others when they see you are a person of integrity before the Lord.

Second, Nehemiah knew scripture. He remembered Numbers 18 verse 7, God said to Aaron and his sons, "But only you may serve as priests in connection with everything at the altar and inside the curtain". Nehemiah knew that only the priest could go into the temple. Nehemiah said in verse 12, "I would commit a sin by doing this". Nehemiah realised that Shemiah had been hired by Sanballet and Tobiah to trap him. Satan will be unsuccessful in ensnaring you and getting you to sin when you know God's word and obey it. David said in Psalm 199 verse 11, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you". Satan will try hard to get you to behave unscripturally so that you will discredit your claims to be a servant of the Lord. A firm grasp of the Bible will give you discernment so you will be able to know truth from error, and right from wrong.

The chapter ends in verses 14 to 19 with reference to correspondence that took place between Tobiah and his relatives who were involved in the rebuilding of the wall. The relatives weren't in opposition to the building work. They worked hard at it. They probably couldn't see why Tobiah was rejected from sharing in the work. They spoke well of him. Nehemiah said in verse 19, "They kept reporting to me his good deeds". Tobiah may have been a charming man. The discerning person would see that he was an enemy of the work. One of Satan's schemes that he uses to frustrate spiritual leaders is to try to influence things through well-meaning believers who sadly lack discernment about the nature of the spiritual battle in which we fight.

Be a spiritually minded Christian. Look at everything from the standpoint of scripture. See things as God sees them. No matter how pleasant a person might be, if he isn't guided by scripture, and doesn't support God's work, then first and foremost your allegiance is to Jesus Christ. May you be an effective Christian by not being ignorant of Satan's schemes.

## Chapter 7

Nehemiah's project to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem was successful. The schemes of the enemies to stop the work miserably failed. The sixth chapter of Nehemiah ended on a triumphant note of God's people. In verse 15 we read, "So the wall was completed on the twenty fifth of Elul, in fifty two days. When all our enemies lost all their self-confidence, because they realised that this work had been done with the help of our God".

We turn now to chapter seven. This chapter teaches us that the work that had been wonderfully completed also needed to be preserved, protected, maintained, and moved forward to even greater heights. Although the crafty plans of Satan had been defeated, the people of God could not relax. So it is for us, in our Christian warfare. The scripture says in 1 Corinthians 10 verse 12, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!". We must never let our guard down, or become complacent. Nehemiah put into place things that would keep the work of God stable and strong and that would move it on.

Verse 1 tells us the first thing that Nehemiah did, "After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed". The singers and the Levites were involved in organising the worship of God. God was put first and central in the life of the people. No work for the Lord will continue with any measure of blessing and success unless God is given His rightful place. The key to effective Christian living is a right relationship with the Lord. He must occupy that central place in your heart and mind.

The greatest protection the church can have is the worship of God. King Jehoshaphat of Judah had victory over his enemies. Why? The answer is in 2 Chronicles 20 verses 21 and 22, "Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise Him for the splendour of His holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying, 'give thanks to the Lord, for His love endures for ever'. As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated" Put God first. Worship and serve Him. Your witness will be effective, and your church will be blessed.

Nehemiah tells us the second thing that he did, "I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do". You'll have no cause for concern for the future of the work of God in your church and neighbourhood when godly men are appointed as your leaders. Men of integrity are men who honour God's word and live it out. Paul gave instructions to Titus about the appointment of leaders in the church. He said in Titus 1 verse 9, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it". Are you such a person? Are such men in positions of leadership in your church fellowship?

To fear God isn't to be terrified of Him, but to serve Him and to submit to Him. When you fear God it will show in your attitude toward Him, and in your daily behaviour. You will want to please Him. You will defend His honour, and fight for His cause.

The third thing Nehemiah tells us he did to consolidate the work of God is found in verse 3, "Appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts, and some near their own houses". There was watchfulness at the gates of the city. The gatekeepers must not open the gates until midday. This was to ensure that everyone in the city was up and alert. If the gates were open early in the morning, as was normal, the enemy could lead a surprise attack. You see, the enemy of your souls will watch for the slightest indiscretion on your part. That unguarded moment. He will make the most of the opportunity to gain entrance and weaken and discredit the work. The Bible says in Ephesians 4 verse 27, "And do not give the Devil a foothold". Be warned - if you do he will take full advantage of it. Be careful what you listen to. Be careful what you look at. Make sure you listen to God's word, and that your eyes don't look anywhere unwholesome. All Satan wants is to pollute your mind and your soul.

The rest of chapter seven, contains a list of all those who returned to Jerusalem in the first return under Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. The list is a repetition of the list in the book of Ezra chapter two. The Psalmist said in Psalm 112 verse 6, "A righteous man will be remembered for ever".

God always remembers those who love Him. Nehemiah tells us in verses 4 and 5, "The city was large and spacious but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been built. So my God put it in my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the common people for registration by families". Verse 66 tells us, "The whole company numbered 42,360". This is only a fraction of the total number of Jews who were living in Babylon. The tribe of Judah alone had 47,000 soldiers.

It is often the case in the work of the Kingdom of God that only a few tend to be really concerned to see it built up and strengthened. Nehemiah knew that there were more people who could get involved at the heart of the work. Jerusalem lay virtually empty and Nehemiah tells us why in verse 6, "They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town". That may appear an acceptable thing to do. The problem was that Jerusalem needed workers to build houses and see the work develop. The church of Christ still faces this problem. There is room for everyone to get involved. The burden of the work seems to be carried by a faithful few. Only a small percentage seem to have the vision and concern. There are many on the outskirts who know of the need, but are too busy looking after their own personal affairs.

The Apostle Paul said in Philippians 2 verse 21, "For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ". When it comes to the work of God's kingdom, as verse 4 says, "There are few people in it". Someone once said, "The church is full of willing people - those willing to work and those will to let them!"

In verses 63 and 64 reference is made to the priests. The verses say, "And from among the priests, the descendants of Hobbiah, Hakkoz, and Barzillai --- these searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the Priesthood as unclean". John tells us on Revelation 1 verse 6 that Jesus Christ, "Has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made us a Kingdom of Priests to serve His God and Father". Without the cleansing of the blood of Christ you are 'unclean'. You are 'excluded' from fellowship with God, and from entering heaven one day.

The Bible says about heaven in Revelation 21 verse 27, "Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does anything shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are

written in the Lamb's book of life". Will your name be found in God's heavenly list? Every person who has received Christ as Saviour is made a Priest unto the Lord. Have you been freed from your sins through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ? Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your own Saviour and Friend? If not, then ask God to forgive you of your sins right now where you are. Repent, that is, say to God that you are sorry for your sins. Turn from them. Ask the Lord to make you into a real Christian. You can know today the joy of God's forgiveness and His presence and power in your life.

## Chapter 8

Nehemiah's faithfulness and courage had resulted in the restoration of Jerusalem. It was once a virtually uninhabitable waste. Now it was rebuilt and repopulated. The wall was now complete. The houses had been restored. The city was now well protected. The eighth chapter of Nehemiah that we are looking at now, records for us a high point in the life of the people of God. The theme of this chapter is spiritual renewal and revival.

God had visited His people in a special way. In the next few chapters Nehemiah isn't in the forefront of the story as much as he has been. He gives way to Ezra the scribe and priest. You will remember that there were three returns of the people of Israel to their homeland. The second was led by Ezra in 457 B.C. about 13 years before their return under Nehemiah. Verse 1 (of Chapter 8) says "All the people assembled as one man in the square before the water gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord commanded for Israel".

Nehemiah was a great worker for the Lord. Someone has referred to him as the "kingpin of the whole work". That is true. Yet here we see one of Nehemiah's main qualities. As well as that authoritative and firm part of his character there was also great humility. Nehemiah knew what his gifts were. He was a people motivator and a builder. Ezra was the preacher. Where had Ezra been during the fifty two days of the intense building programme? Some say he was elderly and unable to do any strenuous work. It is more likely that he was the prayer warrior behind the scenes seeking God's face for the success of the work. He was studying God's word in preparation for the great responsibility that lay before him now. The striking thing about Nehemiah was his willingness to take a back seat at this point and allow Ezra to fulfil the ministry that he was called by God to do.

We are not all called and equipped to do the same work. Some are more prominent in the work of the church. Some are less prominent. Each has his or her place in the purposes of God. Each is equipped by God for it. Paul says in Ephesians 4 verse 11, "It is he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers". He tells us in 1 Corinthians 12 verse 5, "There are different kinds of service but the same Lord". We must work together in the church with great humility. We must never be envious of another's position and gifts in the church.

In Romans 12 verse 3, we read, "For by the grace given me, I say to every one of you, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you". God will visit a humble people. It is sad whenever the people of God have a spirit of proud competitiveness.

The people had requested the Ezra read the Word of God to them. Verse 3 tells us that, "All the people listened attentively to the book of the law". One of the main features of a true revival of religion is a return to the centrality of the scriptures. The people of God have a new appetite for God's word. Ezra and his fellow workers explained what the scripture said. Verse 8 says, "(They) instructed the people in the law - they read from the book of the law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read".

There are some events today that take place in the name of revival. There is plenty of excitement and noise, but the exposition of the word of God is sadly absent. The scriptures aren't taught and explained. As is often said, "In some so called revival meetings there is often more heat than light". Our commission is to preach the Gospel. Paul reminded Timothy of his responsibility. He said in 2 Timothy 4 verse 2, "Preach the word. Be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction".

When the word of God is taught it affects the listener. Hebrews 4 verse 12 tells us, "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges thoughts and attitudes of the heart". God's word penetrated the hearts of the Israelites. We read in verse 9, "for all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law". God's word reminded them how far they had drifted from His perfect will. They saw their sin. The Spirit of God convicted them of their wandering astray. That is how God works. He takes His word and applies it to your heart. He exposes your neglect and how you have fallen short of His requirements.

They were also reminded of all that the Lord had done for them in restoring them to their land as He promised He would do. God doesn't expose your sin to torment you and to make you depressed. He does it so that you'll turn from your sin and renew fellowship with Him. The application of God's word to our hearts is designed to lead us into a deeper joy in our Saviour. Nehemiah and Ezra said in verse 9, "This is a day sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep". In verse 10 Nehemiah said, "Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength". When God's word strikes your soul His intention is to lead you into and even closer relationship with Him. He wants to deal with your sin and replace it with His joy. David said in Psalm 32 verse 1, "Blessed (or happy) is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered".

In times of genuine revival it isn't unusual to see men and women, and even children broken-hearted over their sin and rediscovering God in a richer experience of His love and grace. In verse 12 we're told that "The people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them".

After hearing God's word and experiencing its power, they obeyed God's word. We read in verse 14, "They found written in the law - that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month". This reminded them of their wilderness wanderings after the exodus and of God's provision. This was now the second day of the seventh month. What did they do? Verse 17 tells us, "The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them---and their joy was very great".

The Bible tells us in James 1 verse 22, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says", and in verse 25, "He will be blessed in what he does". If you lack joy it could be that there is disobedience in your life. It needs to be attended to today. May you and your church experience God's reviving presence in these days. You will as you study and apply the truths we've looked at in Nehemiah chapter eight.

## Chapter 9

History records that God is pleased to visit His people in a special way from time to time. We call this divine visitation "revival". Such a visitation took place in Nehemiah's time, and we saw its impact when we looked at chapter eight. We look now at chapter 9.

Any Christian, with any degree of love for the Lord, will want to keep close to Him and please Him. We don't want to lose His touch. We want His blessing to continue in our lives. God is always willing to bless us. Our experience of God's blessing will depend on us maintaining a certain attitude before Him. Nehemiah chapter nine reveals to us that attitude.

The first characteristic of believers who want to be open to the Lord's continual blessing, is humility. Verse 1 says, "The Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads" This was a state of contrition and self-abnegation before the King of Kings. We read in 2 Chronicles 7, verse 14, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and I will forgive their sin and heal their land".

Fasting revealed their determination to allow no selfish desire to obstruct their relationship with the Lord. It is a real expression of self-denial so as to do what is pleasing to God. The Lord Jesus said in Luke 9 verse 23, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me". Are you missing the rich blessing of God because your life is cluttered up with your own selfish desires and ambitions?

Sackcloth speaks of mourning. Dust applied to the head speaks of distress. We should never be proud over our sin. Any thought of offending God should fill us with sadness and distress. In Isaiah 6 verse 5, Isaiah the Prophet said, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" The Christian takes no delight in anything that displeases his Saviour. Rather you will mourn over it.

Secondly, God's people concerned for God's blessing will be a separated people. We read in verse 3, "Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners". The foreigners mentioned here were the heathen people living in the land. God will not bless a people who are no different from their unsaved worldly neighbours. God sees worldliness as spiritual adultery. He says to us in James 4, verse 4, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God".

The well-known Puritan, Thomas Brooks said, "The way of holiness that leads to happiness is a narrow way. There is but just room enough for a holy God and a holy soul to walk together". Are you missing God's blessing because of a worldly lifestyle? It will move your heart away from God. Paul said of his friend Demas in 2 Timothy 4, verse 10, "Demas, because he has loved the world, has deserted me". It may be that you are far away from God today. God wants to renew fellowship with you. You are where you are because you became entangled with the world. Return to the Lord today!

The third characteristic of a person who is determined not to lose the blessing of the Lord, is confession. This will be seen in a twofold acknowledgement. The rest of Nehemiah chapter 9 shows this. From verse 5 to verse 38 the people of God acknowledge God's grace and

faithfulness, and their own sin. This passage of scripture records the longest prayer in the whole of the Bible. Like any good prayer it begins with the worship of God. Verse 5 says, "Blessed be your glorious name and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise". The Lord Jesus taught us to begin our prayers in the same way. In Matthew 6, verse 9, He said, "This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven hallowed be your name".

In Nehemiah chapter 9 he is recognised as our creator and sustainer.

There then follows a potted history of the nation of Israel from Abraham to their own time. In verses 9 to 17 reference is made to Moses and the deliverance from Egypt. Verses 18 to 21 remind them of the wilderness wanderings. In verses 22 to 25 we read of the time of the Judges. The Prophets are mentioned in verses 26 to 31. They conclude by saying in verse 36, "We are slaves today - in the land you gave our forefathers".

Throughout the prayer they readily recognise God's great goodness to all their experiences as a nation. For example, we read in verse 19, "Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert".

A growing Christian is a thankful Christian. Look for the kindness of the Lord in your life. Note His good providences. Remember His tender care of you. When you practice this you will always be grateful to Him and you'll stay close to Him.

We also notice that they did not cover up their sin. They knew that all the troubles they had experienced were the direct result of their own foolishness in disobeying God. In verse 16 they admit their arrogance. "Our forefathers became arrogant", they said. The list continues with idolatry in verse 18, and indifference to God's word in verse 29, "They disobeyed your commands", they said. The thing to notice is they didn't try to excuse their sin or to cover it up. They confessed it. You will never prosper in your Christian life while you allow unconfessed sin to remain there. We read in Proverbs chapters 28 verse 13, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy". The Lord promises in 1 John 1 verse 9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness".

Walking close to God is His will for your life. You will experience a deepening fellowship with the Lord as you humble yourselves before Him; when you are living a life separated from the world. As you confess your sin and recognise His goodness. This will lead to worship, and the joyful response we find in verse 5, "Stand up and praise the Lord your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting".

## Chapter 10

The effective Christian is a committed Christian. If you are committed you won't be here today gone tomorrow. You will be reliable and dependable in the work of God. The theme of chapter 10 of the book of Nehemiah is commitment.

The people of God decided to take definite steps to do what is pleasing to the Lord. So determined were they that they put it down in writing and signed their name to it. We read at the end of chapter 9 verse 38, "We are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites, and our priests are affixing their seals to it". This commitment was public. It was an open thing that others could see. The Bible knows nothing of secret discipleship. The Apostle Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel". Paul was out and about making known the Lord Jesus Christ. The committed believer will say with the hymn writer, "I'm not ashamed to own my Lord, or to defend His cause; maintain the honour of His word, the glory of His cross".

To what did God's people commit themselves? There was a commitment to God's word. Chapter 10 verse 29 tells us, "All these now join their brothers the nobles and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our God". Here was a new resolve to live under the authority of scripture. To enjoy God's blessing you must be living the life of obedience. You must be careful to do all that God asks of you as revealed in His word. Be a careful student of the Bible. Saturate yourself in God's word. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon, once said of John Bunyan, the author of "Pilgrim's Progress", "Prick him anywhere; his blood is "Bibline", the very essence of the Bible flows from him". As the scripture fills our hearts and minds we will be able to say with the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 10 verse 5, "We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ".

There was also a commitment to God's will. In verse 30 we read, "We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the people around us, or take their daughters for our sons". They remembered God's word in Deuteronomy 7 verse 3 where God tells His people as they prepare to go over into the land of Canaan, "Do not intermarry with them". God's will is revealed in the Bible. We must make God's will our will. His will should be our delight. The Lord Jesus is our example. He prayed in Gethsemane in Matthew 26 verse 39, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will, but as you will". Above everything else be committed to doing the will of God as He makes it known to you through the Scriptures.

There was a commitment to God's day. We read in verse 31, "When the neighbouring peoples bring merchandise of grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them". The Sabbath was a reminder of God's rest on the seventh day after creation, and of their redemption from Egypt. The Sabbath had been neglected. The day identified them as God's special people. It marked them out as different from the world. Christians now observe the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, Sunday. This is the day of resurrection, victory and the new creation in Christ. As Christians we should use this day in a positive way and with a spiritual mind. It is a day for fellowship and worship, for family, spiritual and physical

refreshment. It is sad to see Sunday used like any other day. In Nehemiah's time the Jewish Sabbath had become just another day for buying and selling. If this is possible where you are, take full advantage of the Lord's Day to develop your walk with God.

There was a fresh commitment to God's house. Verse 32 says, "We assume responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of God". Their commitment was especially seen in their giving. The money would be used to buy the bread, grain, and animals for the various offerings for sin and the Sabbaths.

The church of Christ needs your practical support. There is no doubt that God is well able to provide for our needs from His own bountiful resources. But God has chosen to provide for the ongoing work of the Gospel through the sacrificial and generous giving of Christians like you and me. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8 verse 7, "But just as you excel in everything in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us, see that you also excel in this grace of giving". The church bills need to be paid. The day to day running of the Church must be provided for. It comes down to your giving if those needs will be adequately met.

Be guided in your giving by 2 Corinthians 9, verses 6 and 7, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not to give reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver".

Connected with that last point we find that there was a new commitment to God's servants. Verses 36 and 37 say, "As it is also written in the law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle to the priests ministering there, and we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites". The Priests and Levites served God working in the temple. They were given to the service of God. Pastors, evangelists, missionaries, all give themselves to the word of God and to prayer. The Scripture says in Galatians 6, verse 6, "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor". When your pastor, or a missionary or evangelist goes shopping and comes to pay, there isn't a special queue with a sign saying "Discounts for Christian Workers Only". Be sure you make proper provision for God's servants. God expects it.

The people of God stated their new aim. They said in verse 39, "We will not neglect the house of our God". May you be just as keen to be as committed to meeting the spiritual and practical need of God's Kingdom.

## Chapter 11

We turn our attention now to chapter 11 of the book of Nehemiah. This eleventh chapter picks up from where chapter 7 left off. Remember that Nehemiah had called for the Jews who lived in the outlying areas of Jerusalem to return to live in the city itself. Nehemiah said in chapter 7 verse 4, "The city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been built". At the beginning of the eleventh chapter we read in verse 1, "Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring out of every ten to live in Jerusalem".

The three chapters between, chapters 8 to 10, covered a period of one month during which the people celebrated the feast of Tabernacles. This one month delay to populate Jerusalem was an important one. The people were moving right into the heart of the work. Spiritual preparation is so important if any believer is going to be effective in the service of the Lord. We need to be in a right relationship with God. This includes hearing God's word and understanding it. That was the theme of chapter 8. There must be confession of sin, and a willingness to forsake it. That was the theme in chapter 9. Then we must purpose in our hearts to do God's word and apply it in a practical way to our lives. That was the theme in chapter 10. Then we are ready for everything and anything that might face us in the work of God. We are also in a position for God to use us.

The Apostle Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 verse 21, "He will be an instrument for noble purposes made holy, useful to the master and prepared to do any good work". This will only be so when God's word is central in our lives, when we are daily cleansed from sin, and, when we live a life of obedience.

Nehemiah wasn't a hypocrite. What he asked others to do he did himself. Chapter 11 verse 1 tells us that, "The leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem". If you're called to a position of leadership in your church then you must be an example to your fellow Christians. In the gospel of John chapter 13 the Lord Jesus washes the feet of His disciples. He says in verse 15, "I have set you an example that you should do as I Have done for you". Jesus Christ was the greatest leader of all. He never asked His followers to do anything He wasn't prepared to do Himself. Paul wrote to Timothy, a young Christian leader. He said in 1 Timothy 4 verse 12, "Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity".

The response to Nehemiah's invitation to the people to come and live at the heart of the work in Jerusalem was overwhelming. Everyone was keen to get involved! Nehemiah decided to cast lots. One in every ten people would move to live in the city. There is nothing more pleasing to God and encouraging for Christian leaders, than when there is an enthusiastic response to a request for help in the church. Such was their eagerness that the people were falling over themselves to get involved! Have you the same enthusiasm that burned in the heart of Charles Wesley when he wrote the hymn, "O Thou who camest from above"? He said in the third verse, "Jesus confirm my heart's desire to work, and think, and speak for You", and in the last verse he wrote, "Ready for all Your perfect will, my acts of love and repeat, till death Your endless mercies seal, and make the sacrifice complete".

Verses 2 to 19 of chapter 11 record the names of those who came to live in the city of Jerusalem. There were 468 descendants of Judah. Verse 6 describes them as 'brave men'.

It certainly takes some courage to be at the centre of the work of God. Many evil forces are set against the believer who wants to be of service to the Lord. Joshua had to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. He would face danger and difficulty. God said to him in Joshua 1 verse 7, "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go". That promise is for your comfort too.

There were nine hundred and twenty-eight men of Benjamin. Verse 9 tells us that, "Joel was their chief officer, and Judah was over the second district of the city". Nehemiah put capable people in charge of the administration of God's work. As a leader Nehemiah revealed real discernment. He knew the people. He recognised their gifts. He put them where they would be used best for the glory of God. The same discernment is required of Christian leaders in every age. Paul gave Titus a challenging job. He said in Titus 1 verse 5, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint Elders in every town". Christian leaders need to be prayerful as they try to shape the church into a God glorifying community of believers.

Verses 10 to 18 record the appointment of the temple workers. Verse 11 tells us that the priests, "Carried on work for the temple", and in verse 15, "the Levites -had charge of the outside work of the house of God". Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2 verse 9 that now every believer belongs to "A royal priesthood". John reminds us in Revelation 1 verse 6, that Christ has made us a "Kingdom of priests". Some say that you don't need to go to church to be a Christian. That is simply an excuse to avoid going!

It is as natural as breathing for a Christian to attend God's house. David said in Psalm 122 verse 1, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord' ". The words of the hymn writer express the feeling of all true Christians, "We love the place O God, wherein Thine honour dwells". Those who know the Lord want to join with others of like mind to worship Him and to hear His word preached. Worshipping together has always been a mark of God's people. Verse 17 refers to, "Mattaniah - the director who led in thanksgiving and prayer".

In verse 19 gatekeepers are given their responsibility to keep watch at the gates of the city. They ensured that nothing came into the city that would hinder the work and that would spoil the worship and progress.

The rest of chapter 11, verse 20 to 36 lists the names of all those who were not chosen by lot and who stayed living outside Jerusalem. Verse 20 tells us, "The rest of the Israelites, with the priests and Levites, were in all the towns of Judah, each on his ancestral property". They weren't at the centre of things but their contribution was just as vital. They grew the crops to feed the city people. They tended the sheep for the temple sacrifices. They were working behind the scenes.

Maybe your contribution to your church is cleaning, gardening, making tea, decorating, or tidying up after a service. It's just as much part of the work of God as any other job in God's house. David said in Psalm 84 v 10, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked". God will reward your faithfulness. I trust you will be about your heavenly Father's business wherever He has put you to work for Him.

## Chapter 12

Nehemiah chapter 12 records the final climatic event to the building of the wall of Jerusalem. The chapter divides into two parts. From verse 1 to 26 there is a list of the names of the priests and Levites from the time of Zerubbabel to Nehemiah. Verses 27 to 47 record the service of dedication for the walls.

The first section, verses 1 to 26, contains many names that will not be familiar to you. Most of them are mentioned just once in the Bible. You don't read of them again. We don't know anything of their background. There are some lessons for us here; one is that we must have a sense of history. Verse 1 says, "These were the priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel". This was the first return of the Jews in 538 B.C. We read in verse 26, "They served - in the days of Nehemiah". This refers to another company of God's people who were involved in the work after the third return in 444 B.C. All this covers a period of about 100 years. Yet all the people listed were part of the glorious work of the building of Jerusalem.

The people in Nehemiah's day were indebted to the people of Zerubbabel's day. Those in the first return laid the foundation. Those in the later return built the edifice. Yet the work is one, and the work is God's. We have picked up the torch of the gospel from those of previous years who faithfully held it high. We are reaping the benefits of the prayers and toils of faithful believers who have gone before us. You read your Bible, but someone fought and maybe even died to secure that liberty for you. You came to Christ because someone told you about Him, and someone else told the one who told you! You enjoy worship and fellowship in God's house because earlier Christians came to your town or village with the Gospel possibly many years before you were born.

Your commitment to Christ now will have an influence upon future generations. In a sense, the quality of the spiritual life of the next generation depends on the type of service you give to the Lord today. Throughout that hundred year period godly believers served God with all their hearts, strength, mind and soul. Let us be sure to leave a godly heritage behind us when we depart to be with Christ.

A further lesson from this part of chapter 12 is that most people listed are not well known. In fact, we would never have known they existed if it wasn't for this list of names. God has been pleased to mention them because of their faithfulness to His work. In Hebrews 6 verse 10 we read, "God is not unjust, He will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him". You may not be a well-known figure in the Christian community. You may never be quoted. You may be serving the Lord in a remote, obscure place, but God sees you. God knows who you are. You're precious to Him. He says to you in Isaiah 43 verse 1, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine".

Your work for Him does not go unrecognised. He sees your toil. He knows the pressures and your loneliness. He understands. Your name is known to the Saviour who said in John 10 verse 4, "I know my sheep". You have an allotted portion. This is your hour. You are where God has placed you for such a time as this. If you're remembered by only a few, rest content in this that you have made your contribution to the ongoing work of the kingdom of God. God will not forget. That is reward in itself!

The second section of chapter 12, verses 27 to 47, deals with the dedication service of the newly completed walls. This was a time of great joy. We read in verse 27, "At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres". Verse 30 says, "When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the walls". God blesses and uses clean vessels.

Before you preach God's word, teach your Sunday School class, witness to your neighbours and friends, or sing for Christ, make sure that you are cleansed from sin. Unconfessed sin weakens the impact of your ministry. Israel had sinned yet they still offered to God their worship and service. God said in Isaiah 1 verse 11-15, "Stop bringing meaningless offerings - I cannot bear your evil assemblies - when you spread your hands in prayer I will hide my eyes from you". That is bad news. The result of sin in our lives always is! The good news is that if you confess your sin and forsake it, God will forgive you of your sin, and He will bless you. Your worship and service will be acceptable in His sight.

The celebration of the dedication of the walls included a procession. Two separate marching groups were involved. Verse 31 tells us, "One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right". This group was led by Ezra. Verse 38 says that, "The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction". Nehemiah was part of this group. Both groups would march on the walls northward toward the temple where they came together. Verse 40 says, "The two choirs that gave thanks then took their place in the house of God". There was a sense of joy such as they had not experienced for a long time as a nation. Verse 43 says, "And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy".

Part of that joy was because of their personal involvement in the completion of the work. The thrill of victory and achievement is always greater when you've played a part in it yourself. The more that you're involved in the activity of your church the more joy you'll experience when you see souls saved and prayers wonderfully answered. There is no greater joy or sense of fulfilment than to see God's work prosper through His blessing on your efforts for His glory. Verse 43 says, "The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away". There is something infectious about joy. It has the ability to attract people and arouse curiosity. I'm sure the neighbouring towns wondered what the noise was all about. The praise and worship could be heard for miles. What an advert for the reality that true faith brings to the man or woman whose experienced God's presence and power in their lives.

People today are searching for a lasting joy. The source of all joy is the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said in John 15 verse 11, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete". The fruit of the Spirit includes joy. I wonder what impression your unsaved friends and family get when they look at you. Do they see the joy of the Lord? Do they see a joyful church? Or do you look and sound defeated and miserable. Someone once said, "A joyless Christian is a liability on his master". The joy that Christ gives is unmistakable. People will see it and hear it. They'll want that same deep joy for themselves, and you can point them to the joy-giver Jesus Christ. Their search will end with a personal encounter with the Saviour.

Verses 44 to 47 tell us that, "Men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, first-fruits and tithes". The people were committed to the practical support of the work. In verse 47 we're told, "All Israel contributed to the daily portions for the

singers and gatekeepers". Every believer in the church is under an obligation to make financial and practical provision for its day to day expenses. This service of the priests, Levites, singers and gatekeepers, and the provision made by the people for the needs wasn't some new idea of Nehemiah's! It is a requirement they rediscovered when Ezra read the word of God to them, as we discovered in chapter 8.

We read in chapter 12 verses 45 and 46, "They performed the service of their God - according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directions for the singers and for songs of praise and thanksgiving to God". The people of God kept to the Scripture. Their consciences were bound to the word of God. Our concern is the same today. The Bible is God's final, complete, sufficient word on all matters of faith and conduct. Test everything you plan to do by the scriptures.

May you and your church experience the joy of the Lord as you continue to serve Him where He has put you.

## Chapter 13

Everyone likes a happy ending to a story. Fairy tales end with, "And they lived happily ever after". If the book of Nehemiah had finished at chapter 12 the story would have had such an ending. The Bible is not a book of fairy tales. It is a realistic and honest book of hard facts about people and sin. You would have thought that after the great celebrations found in chapter 12 that the people of God would continue in their commitment to the Lord.

We look now at the last chapter of Nehemiah, chapter 13, and we find a different story. Nehemiah was not in Jerusalem at the time. After 12 years in the city he had returned to serve King Artaxerxes in Persia. Nehemiah tells us this in verse 6, "I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty second year of Artaxerxes King of Babylon I had returned to the King". However, news travels fast! Nehemiah heard that spiritual decline had set in again. Beware of decline in your love for the Lord. Any decline will make you ineffective in God's service. Nehemiah knew he had to return to sort things out. We read in verse 7, "Sometime later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem".

What were the spiritual problems that Nehemiah had to deal with? The first area of decline had already been dealt with before Nehemiah returned. The Ammonites and Moabites had been allowed into the assembly of God. We read in verse 1, "On that day the book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be allowed into the assembly of God, because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them". God's word reveals His standards and exposes our waywardness. Verse 3 says, "When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent".

Two things stand out here. First we see how quickly and easily we are inclined to go astray. In chapter 9 verse 2 we read, "Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners". Yet after such a short time they're mixing with them again. We are prone to wander. The Bible tells us how to avoid this. We read in Romans 13 verse 14, "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desire of the flesh". Allow Jesus Christ to control your thoughts and actions always. Fill your mind with Scripture and live it out in the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4 verse 27 we're told, "Do not give the devil a foothold". The devil is just waiting for a slip. It only has to be slight but he will use it to his advantage. Give him an inch and he'll take a mile!

Second, we see how the people were sensitive to God's word. They obeyed what they had heard. Nehemiah and Ezra had previously brought the people back to the Bible. Their influence was still felt. They had taught God's people the importance of the centrality and authority of Scripture. When God speaks to your heart through His word submit to it immediately. Don't resist it or struggle against it. That word from God is for your benefit and spiritual growth.

Then Nehemiah had to deal with Eliashib the priest. Verses 4 and 5 tell us, "He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room". This large room was in the temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah was furious. Verse 8 tells us what he did, "I was greatly displeased and threw Tobiah's household goods out of the room". He then purified the

rooms and restored them, to their proper use of storing the tithes of grain, new wine and oil. Tobiah was an enemy in the camp.

Be sure to keep out of the church anything that is an enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ. False doctrine should not be tolerated. Jude says in his letter in the third verse, "I urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints". Sinful behaviour should be dealt with. Paul said to the Galatians, "If someone is caught in a sin you who are spiritual should restore him gently". False teachers mustn't be tolerated in the church. Again in Galatians Paul tells us in chapter 1 verse 9, "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned". Christian leaders must be watchful over their ministries so that false teaching is not given "a room in the temple". Care must be taken about who we allow into our pulpits. No Tobiah should be given the time of day.

A further problem that Nehemiah had to attend to is mentioned in verse 10 where we read, "I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields". In chapter 10 verse 37 the Jews said, "We will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites". You will recall that the Levites were employed full time in the work of the Temple. Now they were having to work in the fields themselves to make provision for their needs.

The Bible approves of God's servants having either part time or full time secular employment if a church can't support them financially. We know that from time to time Paul did some tent making to pay his bills. God understands and undertakes in a genuine case like that. Nehemiah knew that the people of God were not fulfilling their responsibility toward God's servants. It was not that they did not have the crops to give. They just did not give them and held on to them for themselves. God's workers struggled on trying to give all their attention to the work while simultaneously trying to support themselves to meet their basic needs.

It is a tragedy when Christian works are struggling for funds while believers are more concerned about beautifying their own houses, and improving their standard of living. Could it be that there are evangelists and pastors in your church who are in secular employment when the church could support them full time if every member tithed their income? The prophet Malachi preached at the same time in history as Nehemiah. He said in Malachi 3 verse 8, "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me". How is it possible for you to rob God? Malachi gives the answer, "In tithes and offerings". God commands in verse 10, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse". When you fail to give to God's work and His workers; when it is in your hand to do so, God says, "You are robbing Me".

The last problem for Nehemiah was dealing with mixed marriages. Verse 23 says, "I saw men of Judah who had married woman from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab". This was forbidden by God. He reminds them that this practice was the ruination of Solomon. He said in verse 26, "He was led into sin by foreign women". Christian young men or women look for your life's partner among God's people. If you marry into the devil's family expect problems from your father in law! We read in 2 Corinthians 6 verse 14, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers". Nehemiah observed with regret in verse 24, "Half of the children spoke the language of Ashdod and did not know how to speak the language of Judah". It is much more difficult to bring your children up in the knowledge of the Lord in a marriage where one parent is an unbeliever. It is more likely that the child will speak the language of the world than the language of God's people.

Nehemiah's ministry was effective. The secret of his strength was in his prayer life. He prays to God in verses 14, 22, 29, and 30. His work moved along on prayer. The ministry of Nehemiah, Ezra and others, brought the people of God back in line with the Bible. He laid a solid biblical foundation for the faithful remnant. They and their successors would face 400 years of silence before the birth of the Messiah.

As you discover the way Nehemiah lived his life for the Lord, and as you put the principles we have learned into practice, so you will discover the way to "Effective Christian Living".