

The background of the book cover is a photograph of the Jerusalem Temple Mount. It features the massive stone wall of the Temple Mount, with the Tower of David (Mgashim Tower) visible in the center-left. The sky is a clear, deep blue. The foreground shows some greenery and the base of the wall.

F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

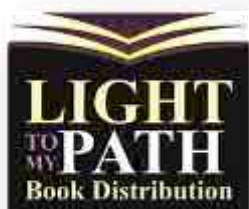
**EZRA,
NEHEMIAH
AND ESTHER**

A DEVOTIONAL LOOK AT
ISRAEL'S CAPTIVITY AND
RESETTLEMENT IN HER
HOMELAND

Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther

*A Devotional Look at Israel's Captivity and
Resettlement in her Homeland*

F. Wayne Mac Leod



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Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther

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PREFACE

Ezra is the story of a priest whose God-given vision was to see the temple of God and its worship restored in the nation of Israel. The prophecy of Ezra was written at a time when Israel was returning from exile. It shows us how a sovereign God can move in the heart of pagan kings and use them as instruments to restore His people to their homeland. This prophecy reveals the challenges God's people had to face to restore worship in their land. Ezra had to overcome false expectations, discouragement and deteriorating relationships in his efforts to see God's people restored to their former glory. While this seemed like an impossible task, God used His servant Ezra to move His people from discouragement to tremendous revival.

Nehemiah, like Ezra, returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. He organised God's people to rebuild the city wall around Jerusalem. He too faced both opposition from the enemy and clashes among the people of God. Personally attacked and criticised, Nehemiah relied on the Lord God. In His strength and wisdom, Nehemiah led God's people to victory and the completion of the wall. His heart, like that of Ezra, was to see a people living in harmony with the plan and purpose of the Lord God in the land He had given them. Nehemiah reminds us that with trust and confident obedience there is nothing God calls us to do that is impossible.

The book of Esther shows us how a sovereign God can take simple people and use them to accomplish His purpose in a nation. Esther was a relatively unknown individual who was empowered and blessed by God to be an instrument of His salvation for an entire country. The book also shows us how God can take the efforts of the enemy and use them to accomplish His glory in our lives. In the book of Esther, we see that there is purpose and meaning in all that happens. You will be comforted and encouraged as you see God working on behalf of His people.

These books speak of victory through perseverance and obedience. They show us what God who can do though all who will persevere in obedient faith. The individuals we meet here in these books are an inspiration to anyone who wants to live a life of victory. They give us the courage to keep going. I trust that you will be blessed as much as I have been in preparing this manuscript.

Take the time to work slowly through these books. Be sure to read the Bible passage noted at the beginning of each chapter. On completion of the section, take a moment to answer the questions for consideration. End your time with a prayer asking God to apply the truth of these passages to your life.

My prayer is that in some way this devotional commentary will have an impact on your spiritual walk. I have often felt unworthy of this task but take courage in what I have discovered in these books. God can overcome even the most significant obstacle through ordinary human beings who step out in faith and obedience. I trust that God will bless you through this simple effort and use it to strengthen you in your walk with him.

F. Wayne MacLeod

INTRODUCTION TO EZRA

Author:

The book of Ezra does not give the name of its author. The focus of the book is the work of a priest by the name of Ezra who was a descendant of Aaron (see Ezra 7:1-5). Probably the best hint to the authorship of the book comes in Ezra 7. After describing the contents of a letter given to him by King Artaxerxes, Ezra responds in verses 27-28 by saying:

Praise be to the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honour to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in this way and who has extended his good favour to me before the king and his advisers and all the king's powerful officials. Because the hand of the LORD my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Notice the use of the words “me” and “I” in these verses. This may indicate that Ezra was involved in the authorship of this book.

Generally, in the book, however, Ezra is spoken about in the third person, that is to say, many of the details of his gifts and ministry seem to be written by someone else. This may indicate that there was another author besides Ezra. The Jews saw the book of Ezra and Nehemiah to

be the same book, and the same authors may have written both.

Background:

The people of God were, at the time of the writing of this book, returning to Israel from their Babylonian captivity. King Cyrus of Persia declared freedom for the Jewish people to return to Israel. Different groups of Jews returned at this time. A first group returned under Nehemiah and worked on rebuilding the walls and buildings that had been destroyed by the Assyrians and Babylonians. This was a difficult and sometimes discouraging task.

When the work of rebuilding the temple was complete, Ezra, the priest, was commissioned by King Cyrus to return to Jerusalem to restore the Jewish worship system and teaching the people the laws of God (see Ezra 7:21-26). Under Ezra's ministry, the Lord would call His people back to himself and the worship of His name. The days of Ezra would be days of restructuring and repentance for Israel.

Importance of the Books for Today:

There are valuable lessons to learn from this book. Notice how the Lord restores those He had disciplined. We see the grace of God in returning His people to their land. We catch a glimpse of His great desire to bless and draw close to them. God's incredible sovereignty is also powerfully evident as He moves pagan kings to give favour to His people and the work of His kingdom. This gives us hope that He can do the same in our day.

God worked in the lives of His people, enabling them to overcome the obstacles and discouragement they faced as they sought to rebuild the temple and restore its worship. He gave them all they needed to accomplish the task He had called them to do. We see how the ministry of preaching and teaching the Word of God under Ezra was the foundation on which this new work of God was built. By obedience to that Word, God's people were strengthened and drawn closer.

The book of Ezra reminds us that while there may be difficulties ahead and need for repentance in our spiritual walk, the Lord will give us all we need to overcome. The book is a powerful reminder of the importance of the Word of God in renewal. It gives us hope for our lives and society to see how the Lord God is willing to move to bring about an atmosphere where revival was possible.

1

THE PROCLAMATION OF CYRUS

Read Ezra 1:1-11

As we begin a brief study of the book of Ezra, we need to take a moment to consider its historical context. God's people were in exile in Babylon because of their sin. For many years, they were dominated by Assyria, Babylon and now Persia. Politically, the dominant power of this time is Persia, under the leadership of King Cyrus.

The book begins in the first year of Cyrus when he made an astounding proclamation. He announced that the God of heaven had commissioned him to build a temple in Jerusalem (verse 2). Why would the God of Israel speak to a pagan king and ordain him to this task? Why would a pagan king be interested in building a temple in Jerusalem to the God of Israel? As unbelievable as this sounds, Ezra reminded his people that Jeremiah the prophet had spoken of a time of exile from the land of Israel and that after seventy years, God's people would return from that captivity and rebuild their temple and the city of Jerusalem.

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:10-11)

I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honour before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it.' (Jeremiah 33:7-9)

God's ways are not the same as ours. God moved the heart of Cyrus to open the door for His people to return to their land. Cyrus was very likely the last person in the world God's people would have expected to facilitate the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy. In our time of need, He brings help from strange and unexpected sources.

Notice also that God is not bound to use His people only. He can even use the unbeliever or anything He desires to accomplish His purposes. In the days of the prophet Jonah, God used a pagan ship captain to rebuke the prophet for his refusal to pray (Jonah 1:6). In Numbers 22:26-28 God used Balaam's donkey to show him the error of his ways. Cyrus had a deep sense of the call of God on his life for this specific task. We need to examine

several points about the proclamation that Cyrus made concerning Israel.

Notice first that Cyrus was aware that the God of heaven had given him all the kingdoms of the earth. Cyrus was a powerful king, but he did not take credit for his accomplishments. Though his armies conquered many nations, Cyrus understood that without the Lord's help he would never have been successful.

Our God gives this world to whomever He sees fit. He is King of all kings. God does not bless the believer only. His hand also reaches out to the unbeliever. Unlike King Cyrus, however, many people do not give glory and recognition to God as the source of all they have.

The God who gave these nations to Cyrus then called him to release the Jews from his bondage. God gives, but He also takes away. As a sovereign God, He has the right to do with His creation as He pleases. Notice that not only does God compel Cyrus to release His people but He also required that he enable them financially.

It is important for us to see in verse 2 that God led Cyrus to put all things down in writing. While this may not appear to be of significance at this point in the story, it proved to be very important later. Because of this written proclamation of Cyrus, orders were issued to the enemies of God's people commanding them to stop opposing the construction of the city and temple (Ezra 5-6). Even in the matter of writing down the proclamation, God had a purpose and plan.

In verse 3, Cyrus issued a command for the Jews to return to their homeland to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple of God in Jerusalem. We understand from

Haggai 1:3-4 that the people who returned from exile also built their own houses at this time. Cyrus blessed them in their return and commissioned them to rebuild the temple. King Cyrus also commanded the citizens of his dominion to open their hearts and provide the silver, gold and goods necessary to accomplish this task.

God moved the heart of King Cyrus. Next, God touched the hearts of His people. Jews from various tribes felt the call of God to return to Jerusalem to take up the king's challenge. When God has work to do, He moves in the hearts of His people to do that work. He also opens doors so that His people will lack nothing to do what He has called them to do. We can trust Him to provide all that is necessary to complete that task. This is part of His call. He will provide the resources to do what He has called us to do. We can step out in confidence.

From across the Persian Empire, resources began to pour in for the work of the temple in Jerusalem. People, whose hearts were moved donated articles of silver and gold. The neighbours of the Jews gave them goods and livestock. Cyrus returned to the Jews the items taken from the temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar seventy years before. These articles had been in the pagan temple of the god of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon.

God is in the business of restoring those things the enemy has taken from us. Christians all over this world are battling the enemy. While the Lord has already conquered Satan on the cross, each of us has experienced lost battles. Maybe as you look at your own Christian life, you are aware of how much the enemy has taken from you. Perhaps you have suffered a broken relationship. Possibly your walk with God is not where it

should be. The church is filled with wounded soldiers. Like the Jews of Ezra's day, we have not always lived in obedience and now suffer the consequences of our actions. Here we meet a God who restores the treasures God's people have lost to the enemy. What an encouragement this ought to be to us today.

Under the direction of Mithredath, the Persian treasurer, an inventory was taken of restored articles. In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver returned to Israel.

It was as if these articles had been kept for the people of God waiting for the appropriate time to be released back to them. When the time was right, God restored these blessings. What does God have in store for us? What blessings await us as we step out in obedience to that call of God on our hearts to rebuild His temple in this world?

What we need to see here is that the God who calls will also equip us to do the work He has called us to do. The God who called His people to rebuild the ruined temple opened hearts and prepared the way for this to take place. He went before His people. God's people could step out in confidence. We too can have that same confidence.

For Consideration:

- What kind of people does God use in this chapter?

- What does God do for those who step out in obedience to His call in this chapter?
- What has the Lord God put on your heart to do? What encouragement and challenge do you receive from this chapter?
- What keeps you from stepping out in obedience to the Lord today?
- What has the enemy taken from you over the past few years? What encouragement do you receive from the fact that God is a God who delights in restoring what the enemy has taken from us?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that when He calls, He also provides all that is necessary to fulfil that calling.
- Ask the Lord to restore what the enemy has taken from you.
- Ask the Lord to give you boldness to step out in belief and confidence in him.

2

THE PEOPLE WHO RETURNED

Read Ezra 2:1-70

We often wonder why the Lord saw fit to include long lists of names and numbers in Scripture. Ezra 2 is one of those lists. There are, however, some vital devotional insights we need to see in this list.

The names on this list are the names of Israelites who first returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity. Many on this list had only heard about Jerusalem. They were not old enough to remember the temple and the once-glorious city. While many had never seen the temple in Jerusalem, the Lord had put a burden on their hearts to see it rebuilt (Ezra 1:5).

These listed individuals travelled from the Persian Empire to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (their leader), Jeshua (the high priest), Nehemiah, Seraiah and other prominent leaders of that day. For the complete list, see verse 2. While the name of Ezra is not on this list, we know that the Lord would call him later to be a leader among these people. We have already seen that God provided the

resources necessary for the completion of the task in Jerusalem. Here He also provided His willing servants with a team of solid leaders to protect them.

We can only imagine the excitement that was in the air as they prepared to leave the land of their captivity. This was the start of something new. God was calling out a team of people to restore Jerusalem and to spread the light of truth to the world. What an honour it was to be part of that team.

Notice in verse 2 that the list is composed of men only. We can assume, however, that there were also women and children who returned. It is typical for the Jews of this time to record the names of men only as the heads of their families. The list of men is divided into descendants. Family lines were significant to the Jews. We will not spend the time to repeat the names listed in this section.

Note in this list the reference to the various offices these returning exiles held. Among those present in this list are priests (verse 36), Levites (verse 40), singers (verse 41), gatekeepers (verse 42) and temple servants (verse 43). We cannot help but notice how the hand of God is putting this team together. These individuals had different functions in the rebuilding of the temple. They have different gifts and callings. God made no mistake when He put this team together. He had a specific task for each person in the work of rebuilding. The same is true for us today. We all have a role to play and gifts to use. God does not call each of us to the same task. He does not give us all the same gifts or offices. We are dependent on each other. Only as these gifts and callings flow together can the work be accomplished.

There are two other things we need to note in this list. First, verse 59 tells about individuals from the towns of Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Kerub, Addon and Immer. These individuals came with the people of God, but it could not be proved from the records that they truly were Israelites. These facts were noted on the list. It is hard to say why these individuals came with the group that returned from exile. Maybe they had their motives. Perhaps they had been touched by the witness of the Jews in exile. We just do not know. The reality of the matter is that in any given church or ministry there is always the possibility of finding those who are not children of God. People are involved in ministry for various reasons. Not all who minister are called of God. I am not saying here that the individuals recorded in this passage were not called of God. There was, however, some question regarding whether they were children of God. We need to take this as a warning. The enemy has always sent his servants among God's people to hinder the work God wants to do.

The second point we need to see here is in verse 61 and 62. Also on the list are those who claimed to be priests but whose line could not be established. Their call to the priesthood was uncertain. These individuals were excluded from the work of the priesthood. They were not to eat the sacred food or minister until their calling was sure. This would be determined through a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim

We read in Exodus 28:30 that the priest was to carry the Urim and Thummim in his breast piece when he went into the presence of the Lord. These articles were very likely special stones used to determine the will of God. It is unclear how these stones would indicate the will of God or exactly how they were used. Through these stones,

however, the Lord would communicate His purpose to His priests.

Again, the warning is that there are those who come to minister to us who are not truly called. It is entirely possible for us to minister in areas where we are not called to minister. How easy it is to look at someone else's ministry and so admire them that we want to be just like them though we do not have their calling. Those whom God had established as leaders among the returning exiles wanted to be sure of the call of those who ministered among them. The concern of these leaders was to see that the work of God was done by those He had called. Those who could not confirm the call of God were asked to refrain.

What a challenge this is for us as church leaders as well. Are those teaching Sunday school in your church called of God to do so? Are the elders, deacons or committee members of your church called to that ministry? We can only truly advance the kingdom if those who are ministering are in the purpose of God.

As this great team arrived at Jerusalem, they numbered 42,360 plus servants as well as many cattle (verses 64-67). The Lord put it on the hearts of some of these families to give a freewill offering for the rebuilding of the temple of God. These individuals gave as the Lord enabled so that the work could be accomplished. Verse 69 tells us that they gave 61,000 drachmas of gold. This would be approximately 500 kilograms or 1,100 pounds or 500 kilograms. The people also gave 5,000 minas of silver (about 3 tons) and 100 priestly garments. These were substantial gifts. God was moving in the hearts of His people. He had great plans for the city of Jerusalem.

God's hand was on the returning exiles. He provided the resources necessary to accomplish the task. The Lord also gave them a team of solid leaders so that the work would move ahead smoothly. Those who led God's people were specifically called and equipped for the task. God moved in the hearts of His people to give them a spirit of generosity. God's people could expect great things from their Lord.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about how God puts together people of different gifts and talents for the work of extending the kingdom?
- How important is it that we know the call of God on our lives?
- Is everyone who seeks to minister called to that ministry? What does this passage teach us?
- What do we learn in this passage about the importance of leadership in the work of the kingdom?
- What is the call of God on your life?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to know His call on your life.
- Thank the Lord that He has given to the church, individuals with various gifts and callings to complement each other in the work of ministry.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be content with His call on your life. Ask Him to enable you to complement your brothers and sisters in the ministry of the expansion of His kingdom.

3

CONSTRUCTION BEGINS

Read Ezra 3:1-13

In the last chapter, we examined the list of people who returned from exile to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. This team arrived in Israel and settled in various towns. In the seventh month, they assembled in the city of Jerusalem very likely for the Feast of Tabernacles as described in Leviticus 23:39-43.

Notice that verse 1 tells us that they assembled "as one man." This is an indication of the unity of the team that God had called to rebuild the temple. There was joy and excitement in the air. The people had a clear vision and unified under that vision. They wanted to see the temple rebuilt and the city of Jerusalem restored to its former glory.

The first item on the agenda was the construction of an altar for the sacrifice of burnt offerings. It was Jeshua the high priest and his fellow priests who undertook the responsibility to build this altar (verse 2). They built it according to the specifications God had given to Moses in the Law. It is of significance that the altar is the first item on the agenda. It was there that the people made offerings for sin. Those who were involved in rebuilding

the temple needed to be forgiven and a pure people. Before moving ahead with the construction of the temple, they needed to get right with God.

Building the altar was not without its difficulties. Verse 3 tells us that they were afraid of the people around them. Even at this early stage, there was evidence of opposition to the rebuilding work God wanted to do in Israel. We can be sure that when the Lord wants to move ahead, the enemy will never be far behind, seeking to discourage those who take on the challenge. Though they were fearful of what their enemies might do, the priests placed their confidence in God and forged ahead. The result was that the altar was completed and sacrifices were offered to the Lord both day and night.

Also, in accordance with the Law of Moses in Leviticus 23:42-43, the returned exiles celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (verse 4). During this celebration, the Israelites would leave their homes and live in small booths made from branches. The Israelites placed these booths in their courtyards, on the roofs of their homes, or anywhere they could find a place to set them up. They did this to remember the time when their ancestors lived in similar booths when wandering through the wilderness. During this celebration, sacrifices were made each day. The Israelites recognized the goodness of the Lord to them not only in rescuing them from the land of Egypt but now also from the land of their exile in Babylon.

Verse 7 tells us that during this time, money was given to the masons and carpenters to begin the work of rebuilding the temple. Notice that food, drink and oil were sent to the people of Sidon and Tyre so that they would bring logs by sea from Lebanon and Joppa. These were

exciting times for the people of God. Sacrifices were again being offered, and the work of rebuilding the temple was under way. It was in the second month of the second year that Zerubbabel, the priest, commissioned Levites twenty years of age and older to supervise the building of the temple of the Lord (verse 8).

Over time, the builders laid the foundation of the temple. When the foundation was completed, the people gathered for a celebration. Verse 10 tells us that the priests dressed in their priestly garments with trumpets in hand. The Levites were present with cymbals. Together they took their places and began to sing praises to the Lord according to the instruction of King David. They glorified the Lord for the work that had been accomplished. They sang of the goodness and love of the God of Israel. The people joined the Levites and priests in celebration and thanksgiving.

We should remember that when the altar was built in verse 3, it was constructed despite the fear of their enemies. The thanksgiving offered here is to a God who enabled them to build the foundation despite the opposition of the enemy around them. It must have been exciting to see how the Lord God was with them in those days. Not only was He providing the money necessary for the construction but He was also holding back their enemies.

Those present that day realized that none of this would have been possible were it not for the Lord God. There is an important reminder here. Where would we be today, were it not for the Lord? As we look at our achievements and accomplishments in this world, do we realize, like those gathered around the foundation, that we owe everything to the Lord God? Do our hearts leap for joy

and thanksgiving to the God who made all our achievements possible?

We need to understand that when the Lord is active, the enemy is never very far behind. Sometimes the enemy comes in unexpected ways. As this worship and thanksgiving were offered to the Lord God, the older people who had seen the former temple were very displeased. They wept aloud while the younger people rejoiced and praised the Lord with thanksgiving.

We need to take a moment to consider what is happening here. Those who had been in Israel some seventy years before this event had seen the glory of the former temple. As they looked at this temple foundation, they realized that it was not going to be as big and as glorious as the old temple. The prophet Haggai describes the thoughts of the older generation of that day:

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? (Haggai 2:1-3)

On that day, there was a mixture of emotion. The older generation could not see how this temple could ever be as glorious as the former temple. The younger generation, who had never seen the old temple, was excited to see what God was doing. The sounds of praise and the

sounds of weeping rose together to God and were heard far away.

We can only wonder what that sound was like in the ears of God. Praise and grumbling do not seem to mix, yet this is what rose before God that day. The people of God had been successful in thwarting the plans and efforts of their unbelieving enemies around them. This attack was more subtle. This time the enemy attacks from within. The discontent of the older generation could very quickly be a discouragement to the younger generation.

When the enemy cannot defeat us using unbelievers, he will not hesitate to attack us from within. How often has the work of God been hindered by attacks from within? This is the first signs in this book of trouble in the body. The unity of the team that God had brought from exile is being threatened.

This passage challenges us to examine our own lives. God's ways are not like our ways. The challenge for us here is to let God do things in His way. The foundation was not what the older generation wanted, but it was what God wanted. We need to get our own ideas out of the way and surrender to what God wants to do. We must be careful lest our own opinions and plans destroy the unity of the team that God has been forming. The enemy had been trying to bring division to the team that God was forming. If he had succeeded in doing so, he would have been successful in hindering the work being done.

For Consideration:

- Have you been opposed in your ministry? What encouragement do you receive from this passage in seeing how the work of God progresses despite opposition?
- Take a moment to examine the things God has enabled you to accomplish in your life and ministry. Where would you be without God?
- What does this passage tell us about how Satan attacks the work of God?
- Are there things that God is blessing around you that you have problems accepting? What are they? What does this passage teach us about dealing with these things?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He blesses and keeps us despite the many attacks of the enemy to keep us frustrated.
- Take a moment to examine what you have accomplished in ministry to this point. Thank the Lord that He has given you all these blessings. Confess to the Lord that without Him none of this would be possible.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have failed to bless what He has blessed. Ask Him to give you a greater appreciation of the many ways in which He works.

4

A LETTER TO KING ARTAXERXES

Read Ezra 4:1-24

One of the things we know about our enemy Satan is that he does not give up in his attempts to discourage believers in the work that God has called them to do. In the last chapter, he attacked by causing discontent in the hearts of the older Israelites, who were not pleased with the size of the foundation of the new temple. We see here in this chapter that he uses another means to attack God's people. This could have been a source of discouragement and disharmony for the rebuilding team. We see in this chapter that Satan also uses another means to attack God's people.

When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard of the rebuilding the temple, they approached them with what appeared to be a friendly gesture—they offered to help. The enemy can be very subtle in his attacks. He often comes as a wolf in sheep's clothing. His attacks are sometimes disguised in acts of kindness and friendship.

In Acts 5 a man by the name of Ananias and his wife Sapphira come to the apostles with a gift from the sale of a piece of property. What was unseen to the human eye was the fact that this couple had secretly plotted to deceive the church by pretending that this gift was the entire sale price of the property. In reality, however, they had kept a portion for themselves. They were introducing deceit into the church. God struck them dead for their dishonesty. What looked to be so innocent on the outside was the effort of the enemy to infiltrate the church with treachery. We see a similar thing happening here in the request of the enemies to help God's people with the temple.

Notice in verse 2 that the enemies told Zerubbabel that they too sought the Lord God. They told him that they had been sacrificing to Him for many years. To understand what they are saying we need to look to 2 Kings 17:24-29. In these verses when the Assyrians conquered Israel many years before, they removed all the skilled labourers from the land and took them to Assyria. Only the poor and unskilled remained in Israel. In 2 Kings 17:24 we see that the Assyrian king sent people from a variety of other conquered lands to live in Israel in the absence of the defeated Israelites. These foreigners did not understand the ways of the Lord and did not serve Him. The Lord was angry with them and sent lions to devour them. When this news returned to the king of Assyria, he sent an Israelite priest back to Israel to teach the foreigners there the ways of the Lord of Israel. While these settlers did learn to sacrifice to the Lord God of Israel, they never quit worshipping their familiar idols. In 2 Kings 17:29 we learn that these foreigners sacrificed to the Lord God but also to their own gods. Eventually, these foreign settlers intermarried with some of the local

Israelites forming the Samaritan race. An intense bitterness grew between the Samaritans and the true Israelites who considered the Samaritans as unclean because they were of mixed blood and mixed beliefs (see John 4). Here in this passage, it was the Samaritans who were asking to help the returned exiles in the reconstruction of the temple.

Zerubbabel listened to the Samaritan's request but refused to let them help. It is hard to know the intentions of these enemies, but we can understand from their response to this refusal that they would only have hindered the work. Already there were those who were discouraging their brothers and sisters in the temple project (see chapter 3). Adding these Samaritans to the team would only have brought more trouble and division. In this offer to help, we can see the attempt of Satan to add more strife among the team members.

We need the discernment of the Lord in the work of building the kingdom. Not everyone who comes to us offering assistance is genuinely called of God. The enemy is quite capable of inspiring his servants to work with us in hopes that he will create division in the body. Maybe even now in your church, you see evidence of this infiltration of the enemy.

Having been refused positions on the rebuilding team, Israel's adversaries then set out to discourage the people of God. Verse 4 tells us that they decided to sow seeds of fear among those rebuilding the temple. In verse 5 we find that these enemies hired counsellors to work against the rebuilding project. These counsellors would continue their attempts to frustrate the Jewish effort from the reign of King Cyrus to the reign of King Darius. Cyrus began his reign in 559 BC. Darius would begin his reign around

529 BC. This meant that for approximately thirty years these counsellors would seek to discourage and oppress the Lord's people. Satan does not easily give up.

During the reign of Xerxes (the Persian name for Ahasuerus, 485-465 BC) these counsellors sent a complaint to the king about the people of Judah and Jerusalem (verse 6). Sometime later, another letter was written to king Artaxerxes of Persia to get him to stop the work of rebuilding the temple. The message is recorded for us in verses 9 to 16. Notice in verse 10 how those who write the letter appeal to their Babylonian heritage. They remind king Artaxerxes that they had been deported and settled in the region of Samaria by Ashurbanipal, the son of Esharhaddon, the king of Assyria mentioned in verse 2. In citing this fact, these Samaritans seem to be reminding the king that they had been sent to Samaria by official decree of the king. This may be an attempt to gain favour and give credibility to their request.

In their letter, the Samaritans informed the king that Jews had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city that had historically been evil and rebellious. The Samaritans claimed that if Jerusalem was restored, its inhabitants would no longer pay taxes to the king (verse 13). They told Artaxerxes that they sent him this information because of their allegiance to him (verse 14). They asked that a search the archives be made to confirm their accusations against Jerusalem.

These enemies knew that if the king searched, he would find elements of truth in their claim. Babylon and Assyria had been the enemies of Israel. Israel's kings had rebelled against Babylon. We have the record of King Jehoiakim's rebellion against Babylon in 2 Kings 24:1.

King Zedekiah also rebelled against Babylon (2 Kings 24:29). God's people did not always accept His will for their lives. Israel had rebelled against God and His discipline in their lives. Satan knows our failures. He will not hesitate to dig them up and use them to his advantage.

On receipt of the letter, a search was done in the archives to determine whether Israel did pose a threat to the king of Persia. This resulted in a response from the king in the form of a letter to the enemies of Israel. This letter informed them that the search had been done, and it was discovered that the people of Israel had revolted in the past. It was also found that Jerusalem had powerful kings in the past. As a result, King Artaxerxes commanded that the work on the temple and the rebuilding of the city be stopped until further orders (verse 21). Israel's enemies were commissioned by the king to be sure that the "rebellious city" was not rebuilt so that the Jews would pose no threat to the king of Persia.

As soon as the Samaritan leaders read the letter, they sent word of the king's orders to the Jews. Notice in verse 23 that the enemies used force to bring the Lord's work to a halt. Israel's enemies now had legal rights to stop the rebuilding of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. Throughout the reign of Artaxerxes, the work ceased. It would not be until after his death that another attempt would be made to complete the work.

What we need to see here is how Satan sought to hinder the work of God. It should not surprise us that he is doing the same thing today. He will stop and nothing to impede the work of God. We have seen how he divided the generations in the last chapter. Then he riled Israel's neighbours against them. He was successful in using the

king of Persia, and for a time, the work on the temple did stop. It seemed that the enemy had defeated the purpose of God. God's people were divided and discouraged. The enemy was oppressing them. God was not finished with His people, however. He would not give victory to the enemy. Though hindered for a time, God's people would yet see victory.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about how the enemy seeks to attack and defeat the purposes of God? Is there evidence of his presence in the work of your church?
- How can the enemy use our past failures in his attempt to defeat us?
- What does this passage teach us about the need for discernment in the work of the Kingdom of God?
- What do we learn about the power of the enemy to bring the work of God to a temporary halt?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you greater discernment in the work He has called you to do.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes and the eyes of the leaders of your church to the ways the enemy is trying to discourage the work of God.

- Thank the Lord that while the enemy may succeed in halting or hindering the work of God for a time, he cannot have ultimate victory. Thank the Lord that He has already defeated Satan and that our victory is assured.

5

HAGGAI'S CHALLENGE

Read Ezra 5:1-17

The work on the temple had ceased. The enemies of God's people had written a letter to the king of Persia who responded by stopping all construction. If the enemies had their way, the temple in Jerusalem would never be rebuilt. This order of the king was a setback for the people of God, but they would get back on their feet again.

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were ministering in the region at this time. They approached the people of God and challenged them to return to the work of rebuilding the temple, despite the order of the king of Persia.

Scripture does call us to be obedient to the governmental authorities over us. There are times, however, when earthly powers command us to do something contrary to the will and purpose of God. In this situation, we must learn to obey God and accept the consequences of our actions. (This was the experience of the apostles in Acts 4:19.) In verse 1, the prophets reminded the nation that the Lord God was over them. It was to the Lord that they were to be obedient. It was apparent that the Lord had spoken to King Cyrus of Persia and commanded him to

send the Israelites back to their land to rebuild the temple. Haggai and Zechariah challenged the people to obedience. The people needed this challenge at this time in their lives.

The result of this challenge was that Zerubbabel and Jeshua set to work on the house of the Lord. The prophets of God joined them. In making this decision, the leaders were risking their lives. In Ezra 4:23 the work had ceased when their enemies exercised force to stop them, acting under the King Artaxerxes's order. Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the prophets were willing to take the risk and moved forward, trusting their Lord.

It was not long before Tattenai the Persian governor of the region heard about the work. He approached the Israelites about this, asking them by whose authority they were moving ahead with construction. Tattenai demanded to know the names of those who dared to defy the king's order.

This was an awkward moment for the people of God. They did not know what the response of their enemies would be. Notice, however, in verse 5 that "the eye of their God was watching over the elders and they were not stopped." A report of their activities, however, was sent to Darius, the new king of Persia. The encouragement for us is that when we step out in obedience to the Lord, He watches over us. There will be significant risks to take in advancing of the Lord's kingdom, but the eye of the Lord is on us, and we can rely entirely on Him. We do not need to be afraid.

The letter sent by Governor Tattenai to King Darius explained what the Jews were doing. In the letter, he told how the work of rebuilding the temple was moving ahead.

When the Jews were questioned about this work, they informed him that they were following the orders of King Cyrus who had sent them to Israel for this very purpose. Tattenai requested the direction of the new king concerning the situation.

There are several valuable lessons in this passage. First, we need to see how easy it is for us to be discouraged by the enemy. The work of God stopped because the enemy succeeded in arousing fear in God's people. This fear kept God's people from obeying the Lord.

Second, notice that there are times when the people of God need to be challenged to return to the Lord and His purposes. Haggai and Zechariah were instruments in the hands of God to bring God's people back to the right path. Maybe there are individuals you need to speak to today who have not been obedient to the Lord because of their fear of the enemy or of what might happen if they continued in obedience. Maybe you can be like Haggai or Zechariah to someone today.

Third, obedience to the Lord will not always be easy. The leaders who returned to the construction site were taking a step of faith. They did not know what the response of the enemy would be, but they were willing to take a risk. We cannot accomplish much without risk in the Christian life. Any soldier knows that when he steps on the battlefield, he is taking a risk. Each step we take to conquer enemy territory is a step of faith. We must be ready to face those risks with faith in God.

Finally, notice that the eyes of the Lord were on those who were willing to take the risk and walk in faith. God saw how the enemy was trying to discourage His people.

As the story of what took place that day unfolds, we will see that God would equip His people to do what He had called them to do. He will do the same for all who will take that step of obedience.

For Consideration:

- Has the enemy ever discouraged you in the Lord's work to the point where you could no longer continue? What is the challenge of this passage for you?
- Are there individuals around you who have been discouraged in their ministry? What would God have you to do or say to them to encourage them to live in obedience?
- How has the enemy been seeking to discourage you in your ministry? What comfort do you find in this passage?
- Is there something that God has called you to do in which you are hesitating? What keeps you from taking the risk and moving forward in faith?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that His eyes are on us to protect and keep us in our service for Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you greater faith to take the risks necessary in the ministry to which He has called you.

- Thank the Lord that He is bigger than any enemy that can come against you today.

6

THE TEMPLE IS COMPLETED

Read Ezra 6:1-22

Haggai and Zechariah challenged the people of God to complete the construction of the temple. They did this, despite the efforts of the enemy to hinder them. The priests and Levites heard the challenge of these two prophets and took the task to heart. This resulted in the Samaritans writing a letter to the king of Persia seeking his advice. The hope was that the king would give the authority to stop the work.

On receipt of the letter, King Darius issued an order that the archives be searched to see if there ever was a decree permitting the Israelites to rebuild the temple. A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media. In that scroll was the proclamation of King Cyrus commanding the Jews to rebuild the temple. In that decree, Cyrus had given the dimensions of the temple and a general plan the Jews were to follow in its construction. Clearly stated in this decree was that the costs for this construction were to be paid by the royal treasury (see verse 4). The gold and silver articles taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the old temple were also to be returned to Jerusalem.

When King Darius saw the decree, he commanded Tattenai, the governor of the region of the Trans-Euphrates, to refrain from hindering the work on the temple. Darius told the governor not to interfere with the Jews and their work. Darius confirmed the decree of Cyrus and issued an order for the work of the temple reconstruction to be completed.

King Darius also ordered that the leaders of the enemies of Israel help the Jews in this construction. He further ordered that the costs for rebuilding the temple be paid out of the royal treasury as Cyrus had previously decreed. Young bulls, rams and male lambs were to be given to the Jews for burnt offerings to the God of Israel. The enemies of Israel were also to provide the Jewish priests with daily provisions of wheat, wine and oil. They were not to fail in this matter so that the Jews, in turn, would pray to their God for a blessing upon the king and his sons (see verse 10).

Darius felt so strongly about this decree that he commanded that anyone who failed to obey him in this matter should be impaled on a beam pulled up from his or her own house, and the house pulled down and destroyed. Darius cursed anyone who would lift their hand to change anything in his decree or hinder in any way the work on the temple in Jerusalem. God had indeed granted His people favour with King Darius as He had with King Cyrus.

News of this decree encouraged the Jews, and they resumed the work on the temple of God. Verse 14 tells us that Haggai and Zechariah preached to the people of Israel during that time. The people received the Word of God warmly and obeyed what they heard. There was

renewed enthusiasm and zeal for the work of the temple. God moved in their midst, and they saw the victory of the Lord.

It is important that we note here that for quite some time, the people of God were paralyzed by fear in the work. The foundation had been laid, but the temple remained unfinished. Fear of their enemies had brought a halt to the work. Haggai and Zechariah were used by God to challenge His people to take a risk and move forward in faith and obedience.

The priests and Levites took up that challenge and risked their lives. God blessed that step of faith in a way His people could never have imagined. Not only did He shield His people from their enemies but He also made the enemies pay for the completion of the work. It all began when the priests took the risk and faithfully obeyed the Lord. With that one step of faith, the blessing of God was released on His people.

How often have we found ourselves paralyzed with fear, as were the people of Israel? The work of the kingdom suffers when we are not ready to risk everything to be obedient. Through Haggai and Zechariah, God calls us today. He challenges us to take the risk of obedience, regardless of circumstance. The Lord shows us in this chapter that we have no cause for fear. Our God can do far more than we could ever ask or think. His kingdom expands when we willingly take the risk and step out in faith and obedience.

God moved through the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah who were preaching in those days. When the temple was completed, God's people held a service of dedication in Jerusalem (verse 16). On that day, one hundred bulls,

two thousand rams and four hundred male lambs were sacrificed. They also sacrificed twelve male goats as a sin offering for the twelve tribes of Israel. The priests and Levites were also installed in Jerusalem, according to their family divisions and responsibilities.

On the fourteenth day of the first month, the Passover was celebrated. The priests and Levites purified themselves and slaughtered the Passover lamb. The Israelites separated themselves from their unclean practices and sought the Lord. For seven days after the Passover, they celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread by separating themselves from anything with leaven. Leaven or yeast in the Scripture is a symbol of sin. By observing this feast, the people of God symbolized their desire to separate themselves from sin in all its forms to serve the Lord recognizing Him as the one who brought them from slavery in Egypt to give them a land of their own. Their hearts were filled with joy because God had caused the Persian king to favour them.

A responsibility falls upon all whom God has blessed. The feast that the Israelites celebrated that day was a reminder that they were a people blessed by God. As they walked in obedience to Him and stepped out in faith, God did marvellous things. He opened doors they never thought possible. May we too have the courage to step out in obedient faith. All, who willingly take the risk, will be surprised at what God will do.

For Consideration

- What do we learn here about the importance of obeying the Lord in all circumstances?
- What is the promise in this passage for those who willingly step out in faith?
- What is the responsibility of those who have been blessed by God as Israel was in those days?
- Is there anything that God has called you to do that causes you fear? Does this fear keep you from walking in obedience?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to see His purpose for your life. Ask Him to give you the courage to step out in obedience.
- Thank the Lord for the way He cares for us as we move forward in faith.
- Thank the Lord for the blessings He has given you this day. Ask Him to help you to live in grateful obedience and thanksgiving.

7

EZRA COMES TO JERUSALEM

Read Ezra 7:1-28

One of the most confusing things about the study of the kings of Persia is the fact that there are many kings by the same name. Xerxes, Artaxerxes and Darius were common names among the kings of Persia. Also, sometimes the names of the kings were recorded in the Persian language and sometimes in the Greek language. It is vital that we understand this if we are to make sense of what is happening in the book of Ezra.

Verse 1 tells us that it was during the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia that Ezra left Babylon to go to Jerusalem. This Artaxerxes is not the same Artaxerxes mentioned in chapter 4. The Artaxerxes mentioned here reigned from BC 465-424.

Verses 1-5 give us the detail of Ezra's family line. The genealogy shows that he was part of a priestly line. He was a man of reputation from a well-respected family in Israel. We should remember that when the people returned to Israel from exile, the priests had to prove their priesthood by showing their family line. There is no exception for Ezra. His line was confirmed, and he was

qualified to act in the capacity of priest for God's people in Israel.

Not only does Ezra come from a line of priests but verse 6 shows us as well that he was a teacher, well versed in the Law of Moses. He was qualified by means of his line, but he was also qualified because he knew the Word of God.

There is another important detail we need to see in verse 6 concerning Ezra. The king had given him everything he had asked for because the hand of the Lord was on him. God's anointing was on Ezra to accomplish the work He had called him to do. God equips those He calls.

In the Old Testament period, only certain individuals could become priests. In those days, the call of God was on families and family lines. It was for this reason that the family line needed to be established for the priests who returned to Israel. A priest needed to be called of God to exercise his function. Under the New Testament God calls people to ministry without regard for family lines. However, the call to ministry is still essential. While we are all called to be servants of God, He has called some to minister in a full-time capacity or office in the church and others to work in a business or as skilled labourers. It is crucial for us to know what God has called and gifted us to do so we can walk in obedience to that call.

A calling is not in itself enough. Notice that Ezra was well versed in the Law of Moses. For this to take place, he had to study the Law and understand its application. Ezra was trained in the truth of the Word of God. You may be called to be a pastor but not ready to exercise that calling because you do not have a good grasp of the truth of the Word of God. While our calling is essential, we also need

to be trained in the Word so that we can exercise that calling effectively. How can we lead men and women into the truth of God if we are unfamiliar with that truth ourselves? Ezra was called of God and knew that calling, but he also was trained in the truth of the Word of God.

There is another aspect that we cannot miss. Calling and training are essential, but there is something else we need if we are going to have an effective ministry. The hand of the Lord was on Ezra, blessing what he was doing. It is entirely possible for us to be called and trained and still not experience the anointing of the Lord on our ministries.

It is all too easy for us to believe that our calling and training are enough. Many times, we think that because we have the training, we can change the world. The reality of the matter is that unless God touches what we do, all our training is in vain. Maybe you have seen God use a simple man or woman who had no training at all. Perhaps you have been frustrated because, with all your training, you do not seem to have the impact you would like. Unless the Lord's hand is on our ministries, nothing of any real significance will ever be accomplished. Ezra is called and trained, but more than all this, the hand of the Lord was on him blessing the ministry to which he had been called.

When Ezra left for Jerusalem, he was accompanied by a team of Israelites. Among them were priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants. The journey took four months, and the hand of the Lord blessed them as they travelled (verse 9). Verse 10 leads us to believe that there was a very special reason why the hand of the Lord was on Ezra. God's hand was on him because he

devoted himself to study, observe and teach the laws of God to Israel. We need to look at this verse in greater detail.

Ezra devoted himself to the study of the Word. To devote oneself to something requires discipline and sacrifice. Ezra was willing to sacrifice other interests for the sake of knowing the Word of God. Many things draw our attention away from the Scriptures. Other activities and interests seem to crowd out our time with God. Ezra committed himself to the study of the Word. He took the time and made the necessary sacrifices.

Not only did Ezra devote himself to the study of the Word but he also devoted himself to the observation of that Word. There is a difference between studying the Word and obeying it. Many study the Word of God but do not apply its principles to their lives. Ezra took the Word seriously. When he discovered a truth, he put it into practice. He let the Law of God challenge his ways. He not only knew the truth but also lived it.

Ezra also taught the Law of God in Israel. What he learned and practiced he passed on to others so that they too would know and live in obedience. It is important to note that he first studied and obeyed the Word before teaching others. How can we teach others to live what we do not live?

It was because of these qualities that the hand of the Lord was on Ezra. Disobedience will keep us from God. Ignorance of His Word will prevent us from understanding His purposes. God is searching for people who will take Him seriously. He delights in revealing Himself to those who love Him and live by His truth.

When Ezra returned to Jerusalem from exile, he returned with a letter from King Artaxerxes. In this letter, the king decreed that any Israelite in his kingdom, who so desired, could return to Jerusalem with Ezra. This was the second group that returned to Jerusalem. King Artaxerxes commissioned Ezra to return to Israel to see that its inhabitants were living in accordance with the Law of God (verse 14). Ezra was even to take an offering of gold and silver that the king and his advisors had donated freely for the work of God in Jerusalem. It may be that the motive of the king here was to see the people of Israel pray to the God of Israel for him so that his reign would be prosperous (see Ezra 6:3-10).

Included in this offering were freewill offerings from different individuals living in Babylon. The king told Ezra to be sure that he purchased bulls, rams, male lambs as well as grain and drink offerings with the donated money (verse 17). Ezra was then to sacrifice these animals as an offering to the God of Israel on behalf of the king and his advisors. The money that remained was to be used at the discretion of the Jewish leaders in accordance with the will of the Lord. If there was further need, Ezra was permitted to draw from the king's treasury whatever was necessary. Beyond this, King Artaxerxes ordered the treasurers in the region of the Trans-Euphrates to provide any financial support Ezra needed for the work of God up to 3.5 tons of silver, 600 bushels of wheat (22 kilolitres), 600 gallons of olive oil (2.2 kilolitres) and an unlimited quantity of salt.

King Artaxerxes commanded that everything be done so that the temple could be completed and God's worship established in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes did not want the wrath of the God of Israel to be against him and his

kingdom. God had put fear in the heart of Artaxerxes so that he respected the Lord God of Israel. In verse 24, we see that the king of Persia even decreed that temple and temple servants be exempt from paying any taxes to the empire.

Ezra was also to appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice in the land of Israel. He was to select those who knew the Law of God and His requirements. Ezra was also commissioned to teach anyone who did not know the Law of God. Whoever did not obey the laws of the God of Israel, according to Artaxerxes was to be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, imprisonment or death.

It is quite amazing to see how God moved in the heart of this pagan Persian king. Ezra praised the Lord as he considered what God was doing that day. God had given Ezra favour in the eyes of the King.

Seeing how God had given him such favour, Ezra took courage and set out to accomplish the purpose of God in Jerusalem. God blessed His people as they built the temple. When the temple was completed, He sent Ezra to teach the people His ways. It was the purpose of God to establish His people, guide them into true worship and bless them in His ways.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn in this passage about the importance of calling, training and anointing?

- How important is it for us as leaders to know the calling, training and anointing of God on our lives and ministries?
- Why was the hand of God's favour upon Ezra?
- How important was the favour of God for Ezra? Where would he have been without the blessing of God on his life and ministry?
- What do we learn about the type of person God uses? Compare Ezra and Artaxerxes. How does God use each of these men?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to be sure of His calling on your life.
- Ask the Lord to give you a deeper burden for His Word.
- Thank the Lord for the way His hand has been on you.
- Ask God to show you anything that keeps you from experiencing His favour on your life and ministry.

8

THE RETURN OF THE EXILES WITH EZRA

Read Ezra 8:1-36

We have seen how King Artaxerxes commissioned Ezra to return to the city of Jerusalem to train the people in the Law of God. At that time the king decreed that any Israelite who wanted to return to Jerusalem could do so, and a number of Israelites decided to return to their homeland with Ezra.

The first part of chapter 8 gives us the names of those who went with Ezra to Jerusalem during the reign of King Artaxerxes. Note that each of these individuals is listed according to family. It was important that each person prove status as Israelites. The task of building the kingdom of God belonged to His people. Those who returned needed to show that they were the covenant people of God. They were able to demonstrate this by tracing their family lines.

Those who were returning to Jerusalem assembled at a canal that flowed toward the Ahava River. They camped there for three days while Ezra checked to see who was

among them. Ezra discovered that there were no Levites in the group. The Levites had the responsibility of ministering in the temple. Ezra did not want to return without these temple workers.

The king commissioned Ezra to instruct God's people in His law. To do this, Ezra needed the help of the Levites. It is uncertain why there were no Levites among those returning that day, but Ezra had enough discernment to recognize this as a problem. He called some of the key leaders together and sent them to a man by the name of Iddo who oversaw a group of temple servants in the region of Casiphia (verse 17). Iddo was able to persuade some Levites to return with Ezra to Jerusalem.

It is important to note here that while Iddo was influential in these Levites joining Ezra's group, Ezra gives credit to the Lord God. In verse 18, he clearly states that it was because of the gracious hand of the Lord God on them that these Levites joined the group returning to Jerusalem. We make an effort but none of our efforts will succeed without the hand of the Lord God moving on our behalf. In total 38 Levites agreed to return to Jerusalem. Another 220 temple servants, commissioned to help the Levites, also decided to join the returning exiles. All these individuals were registered by name and joined the group camped by the Ahava Canal.

How easy it would have been to overlook the absence of Levites and temple servants in that group of returning exiles. Ezra's was returning to guide God's servants in obedience to the Law, and he could not have done this by himself. These Levites and temple helpers were essential in the fulfilment of his task. We need each other if the work of God is going to advance. Ezra makes it a

priority to see that the team was complete before going on his mission.

Now that Ezra was assured he had the people necessary for the task, he gathered them together and proclaimed a fast to humble themselves before God and ask for a safe journey. This fast reminded the people of God that the success or failure of their trip did not depend on themselves but God. It would have been easy for the Israelites to attempt this journey in their own wisdom and skill. By proclaiming this fast, Ezra is reminding them of the source of their strength and wisdom. He set their mind on the Lord God as the protector and source of strength for the journey. It would do us all well to take the time before each of our endeavours to remind ourselves that it is only in the power of the Lord that we can do anything of lasting value.

Ezra did now want to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect them on the way to Jerusalem. He told the king that the hand of the Lord God was on those who looked to him and Ezra wanted to demonstrate this to the king by trusting the Lord God alone for protection during the journey. Also, Ezra wanted the people of God to experience the reality of God's care and provision as they journeyed. It would have been easy to lean upon the good favour of the king for security, but Ezra chose to rely on God alone.

We need to understand here that while Ezra would not have sinned by asking the king for soldiers and horsemen to join him on his trip, he had a leading from the Lord to refuse this offer (verse 23). God wanted to teach His people an important lesson of trust, and this was the means of teaching that lesson.

God must be our trust. It is true that the Lord will use others to accomplish His purposes in our lives but our dependence must remain on God alone. Ezra had this kind of confidence in God. That day the gathered Jews fasted and prayed to the Lord, and He heard their prayer and blessed their journey.

In verse 24 notice how Ezra dealt with the money that was given to him for the temple in Jerusalem. He set apart twelve of the leading priests and ten others. He weighed out the offerings of silver and gold and the other articles. This group of people together weighed out 650 talents of silver (over 25 tons), 100 talents of silver articles (approximately 4 tons), 100 talents of gold, 20 bowls with a value of 1,000 darics (about 20 pounds or 10 kilograms) and fine articles of polished bronze. All these articles were weighed in the presence of witnesses. Ezra reminded these individuals that they and these articles had been consecrated to God. In reminding them of this consecration, Ezra was calling them to integrity. He warned them that God would hold them accountable for these articles. Ezra challenged them to guard the items carefully until they were weighed in the house of the Lord (verse 29).

Ezra expects absolute honesty from these men, but he also does all he could to hold them accountable. He weighed everything and recorded its weight. These priests were expected to hand over to the temple that same amount at the end of the journey in the presence of the priests and Levites in Jerusalem. Ezra trusts these priests, but he did not put a stumbling block before them. We can all be tempted to sin. It is for this reason that we do our best to keep from going places where we know we will be tempted. For the good of the body of Christ, we

may need to put similar safeguards in place to avoid any confusion or opportunity for the enemy to cause suspicion. When these leaders arrived and presented the exact amount of gold and silver to the priests in the temple, no one could even wonder if they had kept any for themselves.

Now that everything was in place, Ezra and those who went with him left for Jerusalem. They left on the twelfth day of the first month. God protected them from enemies and bandits on the way. Remember they were carrying a fortune in gold, silver and bronze. Upon arrival, they took three days to rest. On the fourth day, they went to the temple and weighed out the silver and gold that had been given to them. All these articles were handed over to the priest and Levites in the temple as a gift from the king of Persia and the Israelites still living in the region of Babylon. After verifying that nothing was missing, the weight was again recorded.

When these treasures were handed over, the exiles who had returned from captivity with Ezra brought burnt offerings to the Lord God. They sacrificed twelve bulls, one for each tribe. Also sacrificed that day were ninety-six rams, seventy-seven male lambs and twelve male goats as a sin offering. This was in accordance with the command of King Artaxerxes. The king's orders were given to the governor, commanding him to offer from the treasury all that was necessary for the work of the Lord.

As we look at Ezra's journey, several things stand out. Ezra was a man of tremendous discernment. He carefully considered the will and purpose of God in what he did. This led him to recognize that there were no Levites in the group that had gathered to return. He also acknowledged his need of God for a safe journey. He did

not trust in his own strength and wisdom; instead, he relied wholly on God. Ezra demanded absolute honesty and integrity from those who served with him and sought ways to hold them accountable before God and each other. He provided no opening for the enemy to enter. These are valuable lessons we can learn from his example.

For Consideration:

- Why was it important that Ezra have Levites on his journey to Jerusalem? What things might we overlook in the work of the church in our day?
- How did Ezra find a balance between relying on God and enlisting the services of men and women of faith in order to find the Levites?
- Can we trust people and still demand that they give an account of what they are doing? Does the fact that Ezra requires a weighing of the gold and silver mean that he did not trust his men? How important is accountability especially in financial matters?
- What evidence is there that the confidence of Ezra is in the Lord God? Have you ever found yourself relying on someone or something else? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to be entirely honest and accountable to others.
- Thank the Lord that He promises to be with you and to guide you in all things. Ask Him to forgive you for the times you have not always trusted Him.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to see how His hand has been on you. Take a moment to praise Him for His blessings.

9

THE SINS OF THE PEOPLE

Read Ezra 9:1-15

Ezra and the group that had come with him from exile had arrived in the city Jerusalem. It was not long before Ezra discovered that there were real problems in Israel. Already the people of God had fallen into sin.

From verse 1, we discover that the people had not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring people. In other words, Israelites had intermarried with unbelievers. Verse 2 makes it very clear that they had "mingled the holy race with the peoples around them." The leaders were leading the way in this practice. Also, the returning Jews had begun to take on the ungodly practices of the unbelievers. God's people were not remaining faithful to the Lord God and His Word. Even the priests were guilty in this regard.

God desired that His people be pure before Him. In Deuteronomy 7:1-4, the Lord told His people that He did not want them to give their sons and daughters to the foreigners around them. These foreigners did not follow the Lord. Their practices were often contrary to the purposes of God and would lead His people away from Him. It was for this reason that the Lord commanded His

people to marry only among themselves. God's people, guided by their spiritual and political leaders, had chosen to disobey this clear command of God. They took foreign husbands and wives. These unbelieving spouses led the returning exiles to wander from the principles of God's Word. The Israelites even began to adopt foreign, evil practices.

It is the desire of God that we give ourselves entirely to Him. He wants us for Himself. Nothing must stand between the Lord and us. We must jealously guard our relationship with Him. We must live and be people of God. All practices that do not agree with the clear teaching of Scripture must be abandoned.

On hearing about these intermarriages, Ezra tore his tunic and cloak. In his grief, he tore hair from his head and beard. He sat appalled at such evil in the land. We can only admire a man like this. Ezra took the Word of God seriously. He was grieved when the Lord's commands were disregarded. His heart broke because his people had turned their back on God. Israel did not have this burden for the Word of God. They had become lax in their faith.

We need to see more people like Ezra. Do we grieve when we see the people of God falling into sin and abandoning the truth of the Word of God? Ezra was a man whose heart was in tune with the heart of God.

Ezra was not alone that day. There were others in the land that joined him in his grief until the evening sacrifice (verse 4). What could they say? What were they to do about this situation? They waited on the Lord for guidance and direction. When the time for the evening sacrifice had come, Ezra fell to his knees with torn

clothes. He spread his hands out to the Lord God in prayer and confession. His prayer reflects something of his heart.

Ezra cried out to God telling Him that he was too ashamed and disgraced to lift his face to Him because of the sins of his people. God burdened his heart with the weight of sin around him. God was using Ezra to intercede for His people. Those called to intercede often experience a deep burden in prayer. True intercession is often difficult. To enable His intercessors to pray more effectively, God may place a heavy weight on their hearts. This seems to be what is happening to Ezra. He feels the grief of God over sin in the land. Ezra cried out from a heart that is deeply moved.

Ezra recognized that the guilt of God's people went back in time. From the days of their ancestors until that day, God's people strayed from the truth of His Word. God had often judged Israel for her sins. The Lord had sent enemies to punish His guilty people with the sword. The Lord had given Israel's land to her enemies and carried her into captivity. Israel's enemies pillaged and humiliated her. Despite all this, they still wandered from Him. Their heart remained wicked and unchanged.

In verse 8, Ezra recognized that it was only by God's grace that his people had returned to the land of Israel. It was because of the gracious hand of God that they had completed the temple and had been released from their bondage in Babylon. Notice, however, in verse 8, that it was "for a brief moment" that God had been gracious. In saying this, Ezra recognized that just as God had stripped His blessings from their ancestors because of

sin, so He could do the same to them. Ezra did not take the graciousness of God for granted.

How important it is for us to understand this in our day as well. We can begin to feel secure in the blessings of God. Sometimes we even start to feel that God owes us these blessings. What we need to understand is that God could strip these from us in an instant.

At this moment Israel was experiencing the wonderful hand of a gracious God. He had rescued His people from the captivity of the kings of Persia (verse 9). The Lord had remembered His people in their captivity and set them free for a purpose. He desired that His people honour Him. He wanted to restore them to their former glory and through them spread the light of His truth. He was enabling them to repair what their sin had destroyed. He had surrounded them with His protection and kept their enemies from harming them. The Israelites were a people of purpose. They had been called of God to be His instruments in the world. What a privilege was theirs as His chosen children.

God's people, however, had failed Him again. Despite His wonderful purpose, they had turned their backs on Him. They chose to disregard His commands and wandered into error. We see in this chapter that God's people had ignored His command not to marry foreign unbelievers in the neighbouring lands. These disobedient Jews had corrupted their testimony and covered their light. God had commanded them not to marry foreign, ungodly spouses. Not only had they done so, but they also adopted pagan practices. They were behaving the same as their evil neighbours. The glory of God was no longer in their midst.

In the past, the Israelites had brought the wrath of God on themselves by their rebellious hearts. Ezra reminded his people in verse 13 that while God had punished them for their evil, their punishment had been less than their sin deserved. God had been gracious to His rebellious people and had not destroyed them.

Ezra understood that God was under no obligation to spare His people. God had often tried to reach His people through the prophets and priests of his day, but the Israelites continually refused to listen. God had the right to condemn His sinful people for all eternity because of His holiness. His people had never fully appreciated His deep and intense hatred for sin. They had failed to understand just how serious a situation they were in.

The sin of God's people had sent them into exile in the first place. When, by God's grace, His people had been able to return to Jerusalem, it was not long before they were again blinded to the reality of sin and its effect on their life as a nation. May God open our eyes to the reality of sin and its horrible nature.

For Consideration:

- God's people had become blind to their own spiritual condition. To what extent have we become blind in our day to the seriousness of sin in our midst?
- Through Ezra, we are reminded that God was seeking a holy race to be a light in this world.

Have you been faithful? Do people see righteousness in your life?

- What do we learn here about the gift of intercession? Have you ever felt an intense burden to pray for something or someone?
- How seriously do we take sin in our day?
- Has the church of our day been guilty of compromising the faith? What worldly influences do we see in the church today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the seriousness of sin.
- Ask the Lord to open your heart to the truth of His Word. Ask Him to enable you to apply that truth in your daily life.
- Ask God to search your heart and reveal to you any sin or area of rebellion. Confess this sin and make things right with God.
- Ask the Lord to move in your life, in the life of your church and the in life of your nation to bring conviction of sin.

10

RESTORATION

Read Ezra 10:1-44

Ezra confessed the sins of his people. His heart was broken by the fact that these Israelites, who had returned from exile, had so quickly turned from the Lord their God. They had married foreign spouses and adapted their evil practices. Before God and the congregation of Israel, Ezra confessed the sins of his people and sought the will of God in how to make things right.

Notice in verse 1 the extent of Ezra's grief. He wept and threw himself down to the ground before the house of the Lord. He did this in the presence of Israel. His actions drew men and women of like mind until a large had crowd gathered with him. Together they wept and grieved over their sins as God stirred the hearts of His people. This humility was necessary if God's people were to be restored. We need to understand the seriousness of our sin before we can see our need for a cure. Before moving in power to restore and renew His people, God will often begin by bringing a deep awareness and conviction of sin.

It is one thing to grieve over sin. It is another to do something about that sin. It was a man by the name of

Shecaniah who shifted the focus from grief and mourning to making things right. It is as though Ezra had been so caught up in the pain of the moment that he was unable to move beyond that grief to doing something about the evil in the land. God used Shecaniah to move to the next stage.

Shecaniah agreed that Israel had been unfaithful in marrying foreign women. He reminded them, however, that this was not the end of the nation. There was still hope. Shecaniah recognized that God is a gracious God and full of compassion. Though the people's sin was great, God had not forsaken them.

We need to find a balance between grieving over our sin and recognizing the grace of our Lord to forgive. It is all too easy in our preaching to emphasize human sinfulness and neglect the grace and compassion of Christ. On the other hand, it is also easy to emphasize the forgiveness and compassion of Christ and fail to realize how serious our sin is. It is vital for us to maintain a healthy balance between the awfulness of sin and the grace and forgiveness of God. At this time, Ezra and the nation had not moved beyond the stage of grieving.

Shecaniah proposed a solution. He suggested that Israel make a covenant before the Lord to send away all foreign women and children, according to the Law of the Lord. He challenged Ezra and the people to take courage, to rise, and make things right. This was precisely what God's people needed. They were grieving over their sin, but no one was thinking about making things right with God. The enemy does not fear confession so much as he fears those who rise to make things right.

There have been many times in my life when I was not able to move past the confession of my sin. I confessed my sins before God but failed to accept His grace and forgiveness. Satan loves to see Christian remain in a sense of defeat. He takes great delight in reminding us of how sinful we are. He wants us to stay in that sense of sinfulness and failure. As long as we live as though we are defeated, we are no threat to Satan. He fears those, however, who, realize their sin and rise up to do something about it. This is the challenge of Shecaniah.

No matter what your sin has been, there is still hope. Don't let Satan tell you that you are forever defeated. Don't let him keep you down. Confess your sin. Take courage and do something about it. Make things right between you and God.

Ezra heard the challenge of Shecaniah and listened to his counsel. The time of confession was over. The time had come to do something about the problem. Ezra put the priests, Levites and all of Israel under oath to do what Shecaniah had suggested. That day they took an oath to do whatever was necessary to correct the situation and be restored to a right relationship with God.

Having taken this step, Ezra then withdrew from the house of the Lord. He found a room where he could have some privacy and continued to mourn and grieve before God. During that time, he fasted and sought the Lord. While Ezra understood the grace and compassion of God, he had been called to pray. His burden for the people of Israel would not be taken from him until they were in a right relationship with God. The Lord's call on him for that moment was to pray. God had called others to act, but Ezra was to continue seeking the face of God.

No doubt, during that time Ezra prayed that God would move in the hearts of his people and guide the priests and Levites. This was Ezra's role.

As Ezra prayed, a proclamation was issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem for all the exiles to gather in Jerusalem. Any man who failed to appear within three days would lose his property and be banished from the land. It should be remembered that Ezra had the authority of the king to punish anyone who did not follow the Law of the Lord (Ezra 7:25-26).

Within three days, all of Israel came to Jerusalem. As they gathered in the square before the temple of the Lord, the rain fell. They were uncomfortable, cold and wet as they waited to hear what Ezra had to tell them (verse 9). Ezra stood up that day and told the men that they had been unfaithful in marrying foreign women. He called each of them to separate from their foreign wives and be restored to God. The Lord moved in power that day, and the assembly was convicted of their sin. With one voice they agreed to Ezra's proposal. Ezra saw the answer to his prayers.

It was decided that this matter could not be dealt with in one day. The assembled people agreed that each man who had married a foreign woman would come at a set time before the elders and judges of the land and deal with the matter before them. Only a few men opposed the idea.

Ezra selected family heads from each division of Israel to meet with him. Together they sat down to investigate each case. At the end of three months, the leaders of Israel had dealt with all the men who had married foreign women. In verses 18-43 we have a list of men who had

married foreign women. The priests decided each case and appropriate sacrifices were made for their sin.

Not only were the foreign women to be sent away but so were the children who had been born through these women (verse 44). This would not be easy for these families. Being restored to a right relationship with God meant sacrifice for these individuals and their families. There are times when God will call us to sacrifice our loved ones for His cause. Jesus makes it quite clear in the Gospel of Matthew that He must take priority even over our families:

"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."
(Matthew 10:37)

The call to seek God with all our heart goes out today as well as it did in the days of Ezra. Ezra challenges his people to make things right with God no matter the cost. This will not always be easy, but it will always bring blessing.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the balance between confession and making things right?
- What role did prayer and intercession play in this restoration of God's people?

- Ezra and Shecaniah both seem to have different roles. How important is it for us to understand our function in the body of Christ?
- What do we learn here about the cost of restoration? How much would you be willing to give up to be restored to a right relationship with God?
- What stands between you and God today?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to search your heart and reveal to you any sin that keeps you from a deeper relationship with Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you the willingness to sacrifice whatever it takes to be restored to Him.
- Ask the Lord to help you to understand your role in enabling God's people to be restored to Him.

INTRODUCTION

TO NEHEMIAH

Author:

The author of this book is a man by the name of Nehemiah. This is evident in how the book is written. Nehemiah writes about himself often using the words, “I” and “my” (see Nehemiah 1:1-2; 2:1-5). There are sections of the book, however, that are written as if someone else were telling the story about Nehemiah (see Nehemiah 8:9). This has led many to believe that while Nehemiah was the primary author, there was also another author. There is no indication in the book as to the identity of this second author. Some suppose him to be Ezra.

Background:

Nehemiah was a Jew who had been taken captive and given an important role as a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia during the time of the Jewish captivity. While he was serving the king in Susa, Nehemiah heard about the condition of the land of Israel. His heart was burdened for the state of the nation and so he fasted and prayed that God would restore it to its former glory.

King Artaxerxes permitted Nehemiah to return to this homeland to rebuild. Nehemiah was appointed as governor of the land of Israel and, in that capacity, would

oversee the reconstruction of the city and its restoration to the worship of the God of his fathers.

Throughout his time of service as governor, Nehemiah would be opposed by Israel's enemies, discouraged by Israel's wandering, and frustrated by those in leadership over him. By God's grace and strength, however, he would persevere and see the restoration of the city of Jerusalem and the worship of the God of Israel.

Importance of the Books for Today:

The ministry of Nehemiah began as a prayer to God for the restoration of the land of Israel. God answered that prayer by sending Nehemiah. The whole book is an answer to the prayer of Nehemiah and shows us what God can do when we pray.

Nehemiah had to face considerable opposition in what God had called him to do. Motivating his people, facing the slander of the enemies, and dealing with the rulings of those over him were all issues Nehemiah had to deal with in his role as governor. We need to see from this that not all answers to prayers come easily. There will be opposition to what God wants to do through us. Victory comes through hard work and perseverance. In an age when we want things to be easy and fast, we need to learn the lesson of patience and endurance that Nehemiah had to learn in this book.

Nehemiah could not do the work alone. He needed the support of many people to accomplish his task. As a gifted leader, Nehemiah motivated his people and dealt with the issues that kept them from working as a team under the blessing of God. A study of Nehemiah's leadership skills is helpful for all who are involved in

leadership. His leadership principles can easily be applied today.

One of the most significant principles of Nehemiah's leadership was that as a great leader, Nehemiah never forgot the source of his calling, strength, and wisdom. He was a man of prayer and obedience to God. His ministry began in prayer and was supported by prayer and obedience to God's will. He stepped out in faith, trusting God to do what seemed impossible for a simple cupbearer. Prayer, perseverance and obedience, however, would bring him the victory. The story of Nehemiah is the story of how God took a simple cupbearer, burdened his heart for the need of his homeland, and used him to restore an entire nation. It is an inspiring story about what God can do in our lives today if we seek him.

11

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

Read Nehemiah 1:1-11

Nehemiah lived in the days of Ezra when the people of God were returning from exile in Babylon to rebuild the land of Jerusalem. When this book begins, Nehemiah is in the citadel of Susa, the winter residence of the Persian kings. Nehemiah was an important servant of the reigning king of Persia. God had sovereignly placed Nehemiah in this position for a very special purpose.

As Nehemiah was in Susa, one of his Jewish brothers came to see him. This brother, by the name of Hanani, had just returned from Judah. Nehemiah questioned him about the Jews who had survived the exile. Hanani told Nehemiah that these individuals were in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem's wall and burned gates still lay in ruin. The exiles were living in poor conditions. God's people had at one time enjoyed the wonderful blessing on their land. They were admired and respected by all the nations of the earth. But things had changed—Jerusalem was in ruins. As Nehemiah reflected on this, his heart was broken. The picture of God's people in disgrace and poverty was more than he could bear. That day God placed a heavy burden on his heart.

Verse 4 tells us that for days Nehemiah could not get the picture of Jerusalem out of his mind. He wept, mourned and fasted during this time. He “prayed before the God of heaven,” the God of Jerusalem. It was the Lord Himself who had put this burden on Nehemiah’s heart because He wanted to use him to accomplish a great purpose for His kingdom. Where there is no burden on the heart of the servant of God, the ministry to which he or she is called will suffer. God was preparing Nehemiah by placing that burden on his heart.

Verses 5-11 record Nehemiah’s prayer for his people. This prayer can be divided into three parts. We will examine each part separately.

Praise (verse 5)

Nehemiah’s prayer begins with praise to God. It is vital for us to remember that the reason Nehemiah’s heart had been burdened was because of the conditions under which his people were living in Jerusalem. God had punished Israel for rebellion. He had allowed the enemy to invade their land and take the Israelites into captivity. He had allowed the enemy to destroy the temple, break down the wall of Jerusalem and burn to the ground all the significant buildings.

Although it is not always easy to praise the Lord in trials and difficulties, Nehemiah praised the Lord as the great and awesome God of heaven. Surely, Nehemiah did not always understand how God worked. It would not have been easy for Nehemiah to recognize that God is a great and awesome God when everything Nehemiah had cherished had been stripped away and lay in a burning pile of rubble. Nehemiah accepted by faith what he knew

to be true but cannot presently see. He recognized the Lord as an awesome God whose ways are beyond understanding.

Notice also, in verse 5 that Nehemiah praised a God “who keeps his covenant of love.” Remember the context of this prayer. To the human eye, man had broken that covenant and God had turned His back His people. Despite what Nehemiah saw around him, he still believed that God would keep His part of the covenant with His people. Nehemiah believed the promises of God.

Nehemiah was not discouraged by what he saw around him. He trusted God for the impossible. In a time when his human vision was clouded, Nehemiah clung to the promises and truth of the Word of God. He had reason to praise the Lord. Though he could not see victory, Nehemiah praised God for it by faith, because he trusted in God's character.

Confession (verses 6-7)

Having taken the time to praise the Lord, Nehemiah next turns his attention to confessing the sins of his people. He realized that the sins of Israel and Judah had brought these trials on his people. Nehemiah pleaded with God to listen to his prayer for his people, even though they were guilty. In saying this, Nehemiah recognized that God has tremendous compassion, forgiveness and mercy. Though the sins of his people were terrible, Nehemiah believed that the kindness and grace of his God were even greater. Notice in verse 6 how he includes himself as one of those who had rebelled against the Lord God.

In verse 7, he spells out the sins of his people. They had acted in a wicked way toward God. They had not obeyed

His commands and laws. They had turned their hearts away from God and broken their covenant with Him.

Nehemiah accepted the punishment God had placed on His people. Nehemiah recognized that what they had received from the hand of God had been deserved. God was not unjust. If anything, God had shown great compassion by not wholly destroying them as a people. Nehemiah confessed his guilt and the guilt of all Israel and accepted the Lord's punishment as right and just.

Petition (verses 8-11)

Some believers never seem to move beyond their guilt. They seem to live their lives believing that their destiny is to live their lives outside the blessings of God because they are unworthy of anything else. While Nehemiah realized that he and his people deserved the wrath and punishment of God, he does not stop there.

In verses 8 and 9 Nehemiah reminds God of the words He spoke to Moses. God had told Moses that if His people were unfaithful, then He would scatter them among the nations (see Leviticus 26:13-33). God had also promised, however, that if His people obeyed His commands then even if they were exiled to the farthest corner of the earth, He would gather them together and bring them back to the land He had chosen for them. We can see this promise of God to Moses in Deuteronomy 30:2-5.

Nehemiah did not remain in a posture of defeat but claimed the promise of God to restore the Israelites if they would return to their God. Nehemiah reminded God that they were His chosen people. He pleaded with God

to hear his prayer for his people. Nehemiah believed it was now time for God to move again among His people and restore them to Himself.

Verse 11 shows us something else about Nehemiah. Not only had God stirred up his heart, but He also moved him to be willing to do something about the situation in Jerusalem. In verse 11, Nehemiah prayed that God would give him favour in the eyes of the king. As the cupbearer of the king, Nehemiah had frequent access to the king's presence. We are not told what Nehemiah thought he needed to do, but we can be sure that God had been challenging his heart to be available as the answer to his prayer.

What we need to see is that when God places a burden on our hearts to pray, He may also call us to do something about that burden. It is relatively easy to pray, but it takes a greater sacrifice to be willing to step out and do something. Nehemiah was willing to do whatever God called him to do. He committed this to the Lord and waited on His direction.

For Consideration:

- What trials are you facing today? Can you praise the Lord in those trials?
- Can there ever be a real victory if we do not accept what God has brought our way with praise and thanksgiving? How will bitterness and anger toward God hinder us in our spiritual walk?

- What do we learn here about the compassion and grace of God?
- Is it the will of God that we live in defeat and a constant sense of guilt? What does Nehemiah have to teach about this?
- What is the connection between the burden to pray and the willingness to step out?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to recognize that God is sovereign over the trials you are facing right now. Thank Him that He will use these trials to accomplish His purpose in your life.
- Thank the Lord that despite our sin and rebellion there is still victory in Him.
- Ask the Lord to make you willing to be available to do whatever He would lead you to do for the sake of the burdens He has placed on your heart.

12

NEHEMIAH'S REQUEST

Read Nehemiah 2:1-20

Nehemiah's heart was burdened with the need of his people in the land of Israel. In the last chapter, he cried out to God to do something about that need. He made himself available to the Lord and asked that God would open the heart of the king to grant favour to his people.

We read in Nehemiah 1:1 that it was in the month of Kislev in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes that Nehemiah heard the news of Israel's disgrace. The month of Kislev was the ninth month of the Jewish year. According to Nehemiah 2:1, it was not until the month of Nisan that Nehemiah appeared before the king. Nisan was the first year of the Jewish calendar. This meant that Nehemiah waited about four months before he saw the answer to his prayer.

Though it had been several months since Nehemiah had heard news from Israel, the burden continued to weigh heavily on his heart. When he appeared before the king, he was feeling depressed. The king took note of his mood and asked him why he was so sad when he was apparently not ill.

This question filled Nehemiah with fear. He does not tell us why he was afraid. We are left to guess. Deep down, Nehemiah knew that something needed to be done for his people. Who was he to approach the great king of Persia, one of the most powerful men on the earth, to ask him to do something for the Jews? Though Nehemiah was very much afraid, he told the king that he grieved because of the city of his ancestors lay in ruins with the gates destroyed by fire.

Nehemiah had spoken his heart. The king then asked, "What is it you want?" (verse 4). Nehemiah immediately prayed to the Lord (verse 4). The prayer could not have lasted very long because the king awaited his response. Nehemiah needed wisdom and boldness in his request. More than anything else, however, he needed the Lord to soften the heart of the king so that he would be responsive to the request.

Having committed this matter to the Lord, Nehemiah asked that the king grant him leave from his responsibilities to return to Judah to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. This was a bold request for a cupbearer to make. In verse 6, the king asked Nehemiah how long it would take him to accomplish this goal and when he would be back to his responsibilities. Nehemiah set a time, and it pleased the king to send him.

We can only imagine what Nehemiah felt that day as he watched the Lord God answer his prayers. The spiritual battle had been won during the four months of prayer. Nehemiah was harvesting the fruit of that prayer.

Encouraged by the response of the king, Nehemiah asked even more from King Artaxerxes. In verse 7, he

asked him for letters of safe conduct. He also asked for a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, to obtain lumber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple, the city wall, and his own residence. The king again granted his request.

Nehemiah understood that the hand of the Lord was on him for this ministry and that was the reason Artaxerxes was responding so favourably (verse 8). God was opening doors for the restoration of the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah does not take the credit himself; he gave all the glory to God. How easy it is for us to fall into the trap of believing that somehow because we have had success where others have failed, then we must have unique skills and abilities. Nehemiah credits God for giving him victory. This is a lesson we all need to learn.

When Nehemiah was ready to return to Jerusalem, the king sent him with letters to the governors through whose territory he would have to pass so that they would give them safe passage. Also accompanying Nehemiah was a small band of soldiers and cavalry to protect him on the way.

When Ezra returned to Jerusalem, he chose not to use the king's army so that the king would see that God was able to protect His people (Ezra 8:22). Nehemiah, however, accepted the king's escort. Both men did what they thought was right. Nehemiah did not sin by taking the king's escort. What we need to understand here is that God works with each of us differently. His purpose for one is not that same as His purpose for another. We need to be careful not to judge each other. Instead, we need to accept how God works differently in each person.

When Nehemiah arrived in the region of Judah, two men in particular (Sanballat and Tobiah) were quite disturbed that he had returned to rebuild Jerusalem. These men would prove to be fierce enemies of the work of God as Nehemiah sought to restore the city.

After three days in the city of Jerusalem, Nehemiah set out during the night with a few men. This small group silently went through the city examining the walls. They told no one of their plans. Even the officials who were governing the land did not know what Nehemiah was doing. Had they known they would have very likely caused trouble and tried to hinder him in his progress.

The day came, however, when it was time to share his burden. In verse 17, Nehemiah addressed the people. He pointed out how the once glorious city now lay in ruins. He reminded them that they, who were once a noble people, were living in disgrace. He challenged them to stand up with him and set to work to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. He also told them of how the hand of the Lord had been on him granting him favour in the eyes of King Artaxerxes. Encouraged by this news, the people responded positively saying: "Let us start rebuilding.' So they began this good work" (verse 18).

There is something quite sad in these verses that needs to be noted. At that time in the city of Jerusalem, the people of God are living in ruins. They had become content to live in this situation. The wall was broken down. Piles of rubble that once belonged to glorious structures littered the streets, but God's people did nothing. Only when Nehemiah came did they take courage and begin the process of rebuilding. What is sad about this picture is that, for the most part, the people of

Israel had begun to accept this as normal. They felt helpless and overwhelmed as many of us in our day. The questions we need to ask ourselves are these: How far from reality is this picture today? Have we, as the people of God become complacent? Have we allowed the enemy to destroy what God has given us? Christian marriages and families sometimes lie in ruins. The wall of truth is being eroded as God's people allow more and more of the world to influence them. Pillars of morality begin to lean and topple over as one Christian leader after another falls into sin.

Nehemiah challenged his people to take a stand. He showed them that things did not have to be this way. Things could be different. They could rebuild the walls. The pillars could be put in place again. One stone at a time and the work would be done.

The news of the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem did not please Judah's neighbours. They did not want to see Israel return to her former glory. As long as God's people lived with a sense of defeat, they were no threat. But when they began to realize that victory could be theirs, the enemy began to fear. Satan delights to have us live in defeat and discouragement. If we are down, we pose no threat to him. The reality of the matter, however, is that, in the Lord Jesus, we can conquer any enemy that comes our way. We do not have to live in defeat.

When the enemies of Israel saw that the work of rebuilding the wall had begun, they tried to discourage the workers by mocking and ridiculing them. These enemies even charged the Jews with rebelling against the king. Nehemiah was not deterred by the words of his enemies. He reminded them that in the strength of the Lord, God's people would have victory and that the wall would be

built. The enemies of God's people would have no part in Jerusalem. They would be driven out, and this land would be claimed again for the Lord.

What territory has the enemy taken from you today? Maybe there are individuals who read this commentary who have experienced broken relationships with their brother or sister in Christ. Perhaps you have failed as a husband or wife. Maybe you have fallen into sin and damaged your testimony for the Lord. Nehemiah's challenge to us today is to rise up and rebuild the walls. He challenges us to straighten out those toppling pillars. He challenges us to reclaim the territory the enemy has taken from us. May God stir up our hearts as He did the hearts of Israel that day to rise up and claim the land we have lost to the enemy. In Christ, we can be victorious.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the importance of prayer? How important was prayer in the life of Nehemiah?
- What do we learn here about the difference between Ezra and Nehemiah? What does this teach us about dealing with differences between believers?
- God's people were living in a sense of defeat. Have you ever found yourself in this situation? What do we learn here about God's purpose for victory?

- What walls have been broken down in your life today? What would God have you do about those walls?

For Prayer:

- Prayer gave Nehemiah the victory. Ask God to help you to understand the importance of prayer in your ministry and walk with God.
- What has the enemy taken from you today? Take a moment to seek the Lord about this. Ask Him to restore to you what the enemy has stolen.
- Ask God to rebuild His church today to make it everything He intended it to be.
- Ask God to give you the heart to live in victory. Thank Him that this victory is ours in Him.

13

THE REPAIRS BEGIN

Read Nehemiah 3:1-32

Nehemiah had encouraged the people of God living in Jerusalem to press on and repair the broken wall of the city. This effort required teamwork. In chapter 3 we see the work was divided by family. Nehemiah records in this chapter the names of those who worked on the various sections of the wall.

Elishib, the high priest, took the responsibility of rebuilding the Sheep Gate (verse 1). These priests did not think this work was beneath them. They joyfully took on the task, setting an example for others to follow. The sheep gate was the gate through which the sacrifices were brought into the city. It is significant that the priests repaired this gate. Upon completing this task, the priests dedicated this gate, and its doors were set in place.

The work of rebuilding the walls was not without its difficulties. In verse 5 we read about the section of the wall repaired by the men of Tekoa. There were nobles among the men of Tekoa who refused to “put their shoulders to work under their supervisors.” We get the impression that they believed that they should have been

in charge. They thought that they were above this kind of work.

There have been times in my ministry when God has asked me to do things I did not want to do. There are times when God will use these tasks to teach us lessons or to humble us and prepare us for further service. The pride of these nobles only hindered the work of rebuilding the wall. In the work of the kingdom of God, we ought never to be afraid of getting dirty or putting our shoulders to the task. God is looking for people who will do whatever He calls them to do. He is looking for people who will do whatever He calls them to do. He is looking for people who will put aside what they think of themselves and set their heart to whatever He asks them to do. There is no rank in the family of God—we are all kings and priests.

In the work of the kingdom of God, there will always be struggle and difficulty. Notice here, however, that the work did not stop because of these arrogant nobles. God used others to accomplish what these men refused to do. Other men were more than willing to lend a hand. In verse 8, we meet a goldsmith and a perfume-maker who offered their services. Realize that as goldsmiths and perfume-makers they were not necessarily skilled in the hard and heavy work that was required for building the wall. They did not let this to stop them, however. Although this was not the area of their greatest gifting, it was a work that needed to be done. God will sometimes stretch us in our ministry. He will sometimes ask us to step out into unknown territory. These men were willing to be stretched. We need more people like them today.

Some women also got involved in the construction. In verse 12, we meet a man by the name of Shallum who repaired a section of the wall with the help of his daugh-

ters. While the nobles of Tekoa stood on the side-lines arrogantly refusing to help, the daughters of Shallum got on with the task at hand. The spiritual reward of these women would be far greater than that of the nobles of Tekoa. In God's eyes, status and rank in society mean nothing. We are all equal before Him.

It is interesting to note in verse 27 that the fact that the nobles refused to work did not discourage the men of Tekoa who repaired this second section of the wall. While they had reason to be discouraged, God gave them grace not only to do their part but even more. Maybe you are in a similar situation. There are those around you who refuse to do their part. Don't let this hinder you in doing what God is calling you to do. Let the Lord God strengthen you and move forward in obedience like the men of Tekoa.

As the people set their hearts to do the work, the wall was repaired. This was not the role of one person alone. The rebuilding of the wall required the effort of many. It meant that those who were involved had to be willing to put their ideas aside. They needed to be humble and learn to work with others. They needed to be ready to get dirty.

God is looking for willing people today to expand His kingdom. Are you ready to humble yourself and do whatever it takes? Are you willing to let the Lord use you in areas you have never been used before? Are you willing to put aside your pride to work with others? Will you be more concerned about the expansion of the kingdom and obedience to the Lord than your ideas and desires? If so, God has a role for you. He is looking for

men and women who will set everything aside to be obedient. He delights in using this type of person.

For Consideration:

- What encouragement and lessons do you find in the example of the priests who put aside their regular duties to rebuild the wall?
- Have you ever refused to step out in obedience because you felt that what God was calling you to do was beneath you? What do we learn here from the nobles of Tekoa?
- How important is it that we learn to function as a team in the work of the kingdom?
- Have you ever felt the Lord calling you to step out in an area where you were not comfortable? What did God teach you through this?

For Prayer:

- Commit yourself to do whatever the Lord would call you to do. Ask the Lord for strength to be obedient.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you put your interests and desires before His call in your life.
- Thank the Lord that he wants to use you and stretch you in ministry.

- Ask the Lord to help you to work with those He has put beside you in the ministry. Ask Him to forgive you for the times you have been a discouragement to others around you.

14

WORKING AND WATCHING

Read Nehemiah 4:1-23

We saw in the last meditation how God moved His people to rebuild the city wall. This work was not without its difficulties. In chapter 3 we saw how the nobles of Tekoa refused to put their shoulders to the task. The strongest opposition to the rebuilding of the wall, however, came from the enemies of Israel.

Sanballat was an official in the region. In Nehemiah 2:10 we read that he was very much opposed to the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. Sanballat became angry when he saw the progress being made. He determined in his heart that he would do something to keep this wall from being completed. He began by ridiculing the Jews to discourage them.

In the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, Sanballat asks:

"What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones

back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?" (Nehemiah 4:2)

Sanballat questions the ability of the Jews to rebuild the wall. What we need to understand here is that the Jews who had been spared from the exile had been living in this rubble for a long time. For many years this wall lay in ruins, and no one took the initiative to do anything about it. The local Jews had come to accept that this was their lot in life. It was only when Nehemiah had challenged them that they began to believe that this wall could go up again.

Sanballat tried to get the Jews to doubt their abilities. For such a long time they had lived in defeat. It would not take much for them to fall back into this sense of powerlessness. There are many believers like this in our day. They have come to accept defeat in certain areas of their life. They cannot imagine that their broken marriage could be rebuilt on a proper foundation. They cannot believe that they could ever have victory over sinful habits. As the Lord encourages us to move on and live in victory, the enemy will do all he can to doubt that triumph can be ours. We have all felt the enemy's mocking.

Sanballat asked: "Can they bring stones back to life?" What Sanballat did not realize was that these simple Jews had the Lord God on their side. The Jews could not bring stones back to life in their own strength, but their God could. The God of Israel is the God of the impossible. In Him, there is always hope and victory.

Tobiah the Ammonite was another enemy opposed to the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. He joined Sanballat in mocking the Jews.

"What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" (4:3)

Tobiah did not expect much from the Jews either. He was saying that even if they did build a wall, that wall would not be stable and would quickly fall.

The fact of the matter was that this was the impression that the Jews had given their enemies. They had been living in defeat. For seventy years most of them had been living in captivity in Babylon. Those who remained in Jerusalem had done nothing about the ruins. What was the enemy to think when for seventy years all they saw was God's people living in rubble and captivity?

What kind of testimony does the church of our day have in the world? What kind of testimony do you have personally? Do people expect great things from you because of your God? Does the enemy fear when he sees a believer because of the power that is at your disposal as a child of God? Do we understand the power that God offers us for victory in this life?

Faced with the words of the enemy, Nehemiah turns to God and prays:

"Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. (4:4-5)

Nehemiah did not seek to defend himself. He did not fight the enemy in his own strength. Instead, he asked God to turn back these insults and deliver the enemy over to captivity. He pleaded with God for justice. Nehemiah desired that the enemy see the reality of the power of God and would have to take back all words spoken against the Almighty.

Instead of losing time trying to defend his people, Nehemiah pressed on with the work. Satan would have loved to see Nehemiah enter a discussion with the enemy. Nehemiah chose not to do so. He committed this problem to the Lord and continued with the work of the Lord.

These tactics of the enemy to discourage the people did not work. The wall continued to go up. Verse 6 tells us that the “people worked with all their heart” so that the wall reached half its height. Seeing that their efforts did not hinder the rebuilding of the wall, Sanballat and Tobiah became angrier. They determined to strengthen their efforts to obstruct the work. In verse 8, they plotted together to find a way of fighting against Jerusalem and stirring up trouble.

It is unclear how word of this came to Nehemiah. In verse 9, however, we learn that Nehemiah decided to post a guard day and night to meet this threat. As they worked, they also watched for the enemy.

There is a lesson for us in this passage. Our enemy Satan has not relented in his efforts against the church. He continually seeks to destroy and discourage the people of God in their labours to build His kingdom. The apostle Peter tells us:

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

We must continue to advance the cause of the Lord in our day. At the same time, we must always be watchful. To put down our guard is to invite the enemy to attack.

The physical labour of rebuilding the temple and the stress of the ever-present enemy was difficult on the Jews. They approached Nehemiah to inform him that the strength of the labourers was giving out, and there was so much rubble that it was becoming impossible to rebuild the wall (4:10). We should remember that for the wall to go up, a lot of rubble needed to be cleared. Just clearing out the old debris was an overwhelming task.

This is often how it is in our Christian lives. We cannot grow in the Christian life until we deal with the old rubble of sinful thoughts, attitudes and habits. We must learn to die to the flesh if we are going to live the new life of the Spirit. Old sins need to be confessed and cleared away so that the new life of Christ can grow. There have been times in my life when I have wondered if this was even possible. It seemed like God was showing me one sin after another that needed to be confessed.

The immensity of the task of reconstructing the wall around Jerusalem combined with the daily threat of the enemy seemed to be more than they could handle. Success seemed so far removed from these builders. They felt the strain of their efforts. In response to this, Nehemiah stationed more people at the vulnerable sections of the wall. All the exposed places were covered bearing swords, spears and bows. In placing these individuals at these weak points of the wall, Nehemiah

accomplished two things. First, he reduced the workload of the builders. They could now focus on construction without also having to watch their backs. Second, he reduced the fear of the builders, enabling them to feel more secure. They could work more efficiently and peacefully.

These weary labourers needed support and Nehemiah sent them the help they needed. How many weary pastors and Christian workers are there today who feel that same need? I have been in Christian work long enough to realize that there are many exhausted labourers in the harvest field needing support and encouragement. I have often been among them myself. Maybe you are the answer to the overwhelming need of these lonely workers. Perhaps you can be a guard who watches and prays for those vulnerable areas in your pastor's life. Maybe you can encourage a weary labourer.

After sending guards to the weak areas of the wall, Nehemiah stood up and addressed the people. He understood the discouragement they were feeling. He knew the fear that was in their hearts as the enemy threatened them. Addressing those needs, Nehemiah challenged his people to remember the faithfulness of God. He reminded them that they had no reason to be afraid. Their God was a great and awesome God. He would fight for them.

Again, the enemy was not pleased that their plot to attack the people had been frustrated. God's people were always on guard while the work on the wall continued. Verse 16 tells us that half of the Jews worked while the other half kept watch with sword, spear, bow and armour. They were ready to fight and to work. Those who carried

building material did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other. Each builder wore a sword at his side. There was also a man stationed with Nehemiah ready to sound a trumpet in the event of an enemy attack. It was agreed that when the trumpet sounded, the nobles, officials and the rest of the people would gather at the place where it sounded, and together they would fight and trust God for victory.

The work continued each day from the first light of morning until the stars came out at night (verse 21). During this time the Jews slept inside the city. They did not leave the city of Jerusalem for a moment. In this way, the city and the wall were protected continuously. God's people refused to let down their guard. When they went for water, they would take their sword. During that time, they did not even take off their clothes.

How easy it would have been to be discouraged and to let down their defence. The enemy's threat was real, and the reconstruction work was overwhelming. The Jews, however, gave the enemy no opportunity to attack. Every weak point was fortified with armed guards.

We dare not miss the lesson here. We too need to have such vigilance. We must remain alert because our enemy does not sleep. He is searching for any opportunity to shoot his arrow. God's kingdom must expand, but we must also be very watchful. The people of Nehemiah's day were successful because not only did they work diligently but they also set up a guard to protect the work God was strengthening them to do.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever felt discouraged in the work God has called you to do? What encouragement do you receive from Nehemiah?
- Has your testimony been such that those around you expect great things of you because they know that God is with you?
- What weak points need to be strengthened in your life?
- How aware are we as a church of the spiritual battle that wages around us?
- Have you become content with something far less than what God has for you? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that we can have confidence in Him in our times of trouble.
- Do you know Christian workers who have grown weary or overwhelmed by the tasks before them? Ask God to strengthen them and send someone to ease their burden.
- Ask God to open your eyes to the reality of the spiritual battle that rages around you.
- Commit your weak points to the Lord. Ask God to build you up in those areas.

15

INTERNAL PROBLEMS

Read Nehemiah 5:1-19

In the last chapter, we saw how the people of God were trouble by their enemies as they rebuilt the wall. They posted guards around the wall to keep watch against an enemy attack. In chapter 5, however, problems arose inside the city as well.

In those days, things were not easy for the people of God in the city of Jerusalem. We understand from verse 3 that there was a famine in the land. Certain Jews came to Nehemiah and explained that they were having a hard time feeding their families. They needed grain to stay alive. Others had to mortgage their fields, vineyards and homes to get the grain necessary to feed their families.

This lack of food was not the only problem in the land. Some Jews had borrowed money from their brothers and sisters to pay the king's taxes on their fields and vineyards. To pay back what they had acquired from their brothers and sisters, the poorer Jews had to subject their sons and daughters to slavery (verse 5). Some even sold their fields and vineyards to pay their debts. They were experiencing severe economic hardship.

When Nehemiah heard these things, he became outraged. He called a meeting of the Jews and spoke to them about this issue. What disturbed him most was how the wealthy Jews were profiting from the hardship of their poorer brothers and sisters. The wealthy were demanding interest on the loans they had given the poor. Nehemiah reminded the wealthy Jews of how they had been set free from slavery in Babylon (verse 8), and now they were enslaving their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. These wealthy Jews were no better than those who had taken them into captivity many years ago. There was an unusual quiet as Nehemiah spoke that day. Those who were guilty knew that what Nehemiah spoke the truth.

Nehemiah also reminded the Jews of their responsibility before God to do what was right and to be a witness to the character of God in their actions before unbelievers. Nehemiah made it clear to his fellow Jews that what they were doing did not honour God and did not represent the Lord correctly before the watching world.

Unbelievers are watching us today. The Jews of Nehemiah's day had failed to be the witnesses they should have been because they were mistreating their brothers and sisters. The unbelievers were seeing this and forming a false opinion about the God they served.

Jesus reminds us in the Gospel of John the world will know we belong to Him by the way we love each other in the church.

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35)

This is a challenge for us in our day. The world will form an opinion about the Lord Jesus based on our relationship with each other.

Nehemiah did not condemn the lending of grain. What he did condemn, however, was the outrageous interest. This interest was a heavy burden on the poorer brothers and sisters. Because of this burden, families were losing everything they had.

Nehemiah proposed that all fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses be given back to their original owners. He also commanded the nobles and rulers to give back the interest they had overcharged their brothers and sisters. Nehemiah understood that it was not enough for the people of God to recognize and stop their sin. Something needed to be done to restore what they had taken from the poorer Israelites.

In the Gospel of Luke when Zacchaeus was confronted with his sin of taking more taxes than was necessary, he told Jesus that if he had cheated anyone, he would pay back four times that amount (Luke 19:8). The Law of Moses stated that those who stole were to restore what they had taken plus one-fifth its value.

"Say to the Israelites: 'When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD, that person is guilty and must confess the sin he has committed. He must make full restitution for his wrong, add one fifth to it and give it all to the person he has wronged. (Numbers 5:6-7)

It is not enough to confess that we have done wrong. As far as possible, we also need to restore what we have taken from those we have offended.

This is what Nehemiah is proposing to his people. That day the Spirit of God moved in the hearts of His people. They agreed to restore what they had taken and no longer demand interest. To seal this promise, they took an oath before the priests and before God that they would honour their brothers and sisters from that point forward.

To symbolize this agreement, Nehemiah shook out the folds of his robe saying:

"In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!" (Nehemiah 5:13)

The shaking out of the folds of the one's garment was a graphic symbol. When the folds of the garments were shaken out, anything in those folds was scattered. Nehemiah told them that if they were unfaithful to the oath they had taken, God would shake out the folds of His garment and His people and all they had would be scattered to the wind.

Nehemiah did not see himself exempt from this oath. As governor in the land of Judah, he refused to eat the food that was customarily allotted to the governor. Unlike other governors, he made the burden easy for the people of Judah. Nehemiah devoted himself to working on the wall. He did not demand land for himself. Each day he fed one hundred and fifty Jews. Officials ate at his table as well

as many foreigners. Every day an ox, six sheep and poultry were prepared for him and his servants to eat. Nehemiah is very open and accountable to God and Judah for how he used his resources. Nehemiah dedicated himself to being hospitable and gracious in his dealings with the people of Judah.

The concern of Nehemiah is how he could use his position to minister and bless the people of God. He willingly sacrificed his rights as governor so that others could have more resources. This sacrificial attitude was a crucial component in the success of his ministry. May God give us more leaders like Nehemiah, willing to sacrifice their rights and comforts for the sake of the Lord's work.

Satan attempted to divide brothers and sisters in the city of Jerusalem. He knew that if he could break their spirit and cause them to become bitter and angry at each other, then the work of the kingdom would suffer. He uses this same technique today. Nehemiah understood the seriousness of this problem and did what was necessary to restore relationships. In this way, the Lord's work could advance.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to consider the relationships you have in the body of Christ today. Are there any broken relationships you need to mend?

- What is the connection between our relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ and our witness in the world?
- What do we learn here about the importance of not only confessing our sin but also making things right?
- What do we learn from the example of Nehemiah's leadership in this chapter?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you if there is a brother or sister you have offended. Ask Him to give you strength and wisdom to make things right with this person.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be willing to sacrifice your rights for the sake of the body of Christ, as did Nehemiah.
- Thank the Lord for the way He can use us to overcome the attacks of the enemy against the church?
- Take a moment to ask the Lord to protect relationships in your church. Ask Him to teach you to love and bless those He puts on your path.

16

PERSONAL ATTACKS

Read Nehemiah 6:1-19

The work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem had not without its difficulties. Each day the Samaritan leaders threatened the people of God with ridicule and threats of physical violence. The Jews responded by continuing to rebuild the wall and by working with swords hung at their sides in preparation for an enemy attack. The enemies of God's people had done their best to discourage them in their efforts to complete the Lord's work, but the Jews continued to move forward. Seeing that their efforts were to no avail, the enemy changed tactics. In this chapter, the enemy decided to attack Nehemiah personally.

We need to realize that leaders will often be subject to the attack of the enemy. Satan knows that when the leader falls, the people will not be far behind. The personal attacks on Nehemiah began when Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem heard that the wall had been completed except for the doors in the gates. Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to Nehemiah asking him to meet with them in one of the villages on the Plain of Ono in the territory of Benjamin. This meant that Nehemiah would have had to leave the city of Jerusalem and the

work of reconstruction there. Verse 2 tells us that hidden behind this invitation was a scheme to harm Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was suspicious of the invitation. More than that, however, he knew that in his absence the work would stop. God had called him to complete this work, and he refused to leave it until the job was finished. The enemies sent an invitation four times to Nehemiah, but each time he refused. Satan knows that while we may resist his temptations once, the more he keeps tempting, the more likely we are to give in finally. He perseveres in his attacks. Nehemiah, however, resisted their persistent temptation and each time returned the same answer.

The fifth time the messenger came, he handed Nehemiah an unsealed letter. The fact that this letter was unsealed was significant. When a letter was sealed, the contents were hidden from anyone but the writer and the reader. This unsealed letter, however, was like a postcard we might send in the mail. The contents were for anyone to read. Sanballat was warning Nehemiah that the contents of this letter had been made public.

In the unsealed letter, Sanballat told Nehemiah that he had heard that the Jews, under his leadership, were plotting a revolt. This was unfounded. Sanballat also accused Nehemiah of wanting to become the king of the Jews and of already appointing prophets to proclaim him king in Judah. Sanballat reminded Nehemiah that this report would very quickly get back to the king of Persia who would waste no time in sending his army to destroy the Jews. Having said this, Sanballat once again invited Nehemiah to meet with him. The intention of Sanballat here was to scare Nehemiah into coming to see him so that they could do him serious harm.

This letter, however, did not threaten Nehemiah. He told Sanballat that all these accusations were only the imaginations of his mind. Nehemiah understood that the only reason for this letter was to cause the Jews to fear and stop the work (verse 9).

Though Sanballat's letter had not intimidated Nehemiah, he took it very seriously. In verse 9, he went to God to ask Him for strength to continue the work. As a human being, Nehemiah felt these threats intensely; but as a servant of God, he was not going to give in to the enemy's attacks. He cried out to God for the strength necessary to complete the task and resist the enemy.

What is worth noting is that Nehemiah came to God for that strength. The apostle James tells us in James 4:2 that we do not have because we do not ask. God's strength was available to Nehemiah, but he needed to ask Him for it. How many times have we failed to receive from God because we did not ask? What do you need to accomplish the task that God wants you to achieve? God is willing to give you all you need if you will come to Him and ask. To do so requires humbling ourselves to recognize that we do not have the strength we need.

One day Nehemiah went to the house of a prophet by the name of Shemaiah. Shemaiah had shut himself up in his home. It is unclear as to the purpose of this isolation. It is possible that he had done so with the intention of meeting with God. Shemaiah told Nehemiah that men were seeking to kill him. This word was apparently correct. Shemaiah then told Nehemiah to hide in the temple for protection.

Nehemiah refused to listen to the counsel of Shemaiah. There are several possible reasons for this. First, if

Nehemiah locked himself in the temple, he would be admitting that his God was able to protect him. This would have sent a message of fear and defeat to the people under him. Second, if Nehemiah hid in the temple, he would have to withdraw from the work God had called him to do. The people would be left without a leader. Nehemiah did not feel that it would be proper to run away from the task to which God had called him. He needed to set an example for his people, and he was willing to die to do that. He feared God more than then he feared to lose his life.

Notice how the enemy puts a religious twist on this temptation by using a prophet. Satan will not hesitate to hide behind religious language. We need to realize that he will use any method he can to accomplish his purposes. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira come to the temple with a gift. To all outward appearances, this was a wonderful thing. What was unseen to the human eye, however, was that Satan had put it on their heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and the church. We need to be careful not to be deceived by those who use religious language to accomplish the enemy's purposes. It was not long before Nehemiah realized that the enemy had hired Shemaiah to mislead and discredit him before the people (verses 12-13).

These examples were only a few examples of the personal attacks on Nehemiah in those days. In verse 14, Nehemiah mentioned other prophets who tried to intimidate him. Mention is made of Noadiah in particular. The enemy was using the religious people of the day for evil purposes. Nehemiah not only had to be aware of attacks from external enemies but also from internal enemies as well. Maybe you have experienced attacks from inside

your church. Any pastor knows the struggle of maintaining unity and harmony in the body of Christ. Satan does his best to attack from every angle.

Despite all the efforts of the enemy, God's people completed the wall in fifty-two days. When their enemies saw that the wall was finished, they became afraid and lost confidence. Despite tremendous obstacles, God's people had persevered and accomplished the impossible. The enemy understood that this work was completed with the help of the Lord God. The completion of this wall was a clear sign to the enemy that the Lord God was with His people. God gave them all they needed to finish the work he had called them to do.

The tasks to which God has called us will require much effort and struggle at times. We may have to face our share of difficulties and pain. God does not promise that we will never have struggles, but He does promise to get us through each of those struggles if we persevere and continue in obedience. Isaiah 43:2 is a clear example of this:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

Notice in verses 17 to 19 how Tobiah tried to undermine Nehemiah's authority by continually sending letters to the Jewish nobles to develop good relationships with them. The nobles fell into this trap and listened to what Tobiah was saying. Many of these leaders come to Nehemiah reporting to him all the good deeds of Tobiah. Tobiah was gaining the favour of the nobles and at the same time

trying to destroy Nehemiah's reputation and leadership. Tobiah was an instrument in the hand of Satan to undermine the work of God's chosen servant. One day Tobiah would have to answer to God for this. The nobles did not understand what was happening. Although Tobiah did many great things and gained the respect of the nobles in the land, in reality, he was a tool of Satan. How easy it is for us to be deceived. We need the discernment of God if we are to see His kingdom expand. Nehemiah had that discernment and did not fail in the ministry to which God had called him.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the tactics of the enemy to destroy the work of God?
- How does the enemy seek to distract you from your calling?
- What do we learn about the reality of difficulties and trials in the work of God?
- Have you ever seen evidence of Satan using people in the church to hinder the work of God? Explain.
- What do we learn in this chapter about the need for discernment and strength from the Lord?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you greater discernment to recognize the presence of the enemy and his attacks.
- Ask God to bring a greater sense of unity and harmony to the body of Christ.
- Ask God for perseverance and strength to face the difficulties before you right now.
- Take a moment to pray for your spiritual leaders. Ask God to protect and keep them. Ask Him to give them strength and discernment to face the opposition of the enemy.

SETTLED IN JERUSALEM

Read Nehemiah 7:1-73

The city wall of the city of Jerusalem was now complete. Nehemiah had completed the task the Lord his God had given him to do. The road to the completion of this wall had been a long one. It began with a burden on his heart while he was still in exile. God had wonderfully opened the door for him to return to Jerusalem. With the blessing of the king of Persia, Nehemiah returned to his homeland with a number of Israelites. He persevered through many difficulties and personal attacks to complete the rebuilding in less than two months. This had not been the effort of Nehemiah alone. God's people had submitted to Nehemiah's leadership and persevered in this massive undertaking. God blessed their efforts, and the work was completed.

Now that the work on the wall was completed, Nehemiah set his heart to create some order in the city. His first task was to appoint leadership. He appointed gatekeepers, singers and Levites to minister and protect the city. Nehemiah also appointed his brother Hanani to oversee the city of Jerusalem. He named Hananiah as commander of the citadel. Verse 2 makes it very clear that the reason he appointed these men was because they were

men of integrity who feared God more than most men did. Nehemiah knew that he could trust them to deal honestly with the people and lead them in the ways of the Lord God.

Nehemiah's priorities were right. His concern was that the people of Israel live in obedience to the Lord God in the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah knew that this would be the secret to their success as a people. God would honour those who honoured him and lived in obedience to his commands (Deuteronomy 4:40; 28:1-2).

In verse 3, Nehemiah commanded that the gates of the city be closed at night and remain closed until the sun was hot. We need to remember that Israel's enemies were not content to see the Israelites return to their homeland. These enemies would take any opportunity to attack the city. The gates were closed each night to protect the people inside the wall. Those gates would remain closed until the sun had come up and everyone was out of bed and alert. That way should the enemy attack, God's people would be ready.

Not only were the gates to be closed and protected but Nehemiah commanded that residents of Jerusalem be appointed to guard a section of wall near their own homes. In this way, the city would always be on guard and ready to face the enemy. Jerusalem was to be in a constant state of alert.

We need to understand that this same principle applies to our walk with the Lord. While those who have accepted the Lord Jesus are surrounded by the wall of salvation, this does not mean that we can let down our guard. Our enemy, Satan is always seeking an opportunity to trap us. The apostle Peter warns Christians in 1 Peter 5:8:

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

For this reason, we need to be always on guard. Satan will do anything he can to cause us to wander off the path of righteousness. We must never let down our guard.

At this time, though the wall of the city had been built, many homes were still in disrepair. The city was large, but only a few people were living in it. There was much work to be done. In some ways, this is not unlike our walk with God. Salvation is only the beginning for us. I am discovering that though my salvation is sure, I still have much work to do in my life. There are areas of my life that need to be repaired and healed. To grow in my faith, I need to place my confidence and trust in the Lord. Faith will increase as I learn to be more obedient. The wall of salvation has been completed, and I am now surrounded by God's forgiveness and grace. But I have to work inside this wall, repairing and restoring what has been broken down by the enemy. This is a lifelong process.

The Lord put it on the heart of Nehemiah to register all those who returned from exile. It is important that we notice here that Nehemiah is taking his direction from the Lord God. He has enough of a relationship with him that God could lead him in specific ways. I would love to be at a place in my walk with the Lord that I could more clearly know the Lord's leading and direction in specific matters. I suppose that all of us struggle to understand the will of God at any given moment. Nehemiah heard the Lord God and responded in obedience.

The names of those who had returned from captivity were recorded. The nobles and the people gathered in the city of Jerusalem for this registration. It is interesting to compare this with what John wrote in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 20:12-15 John speaks about a Book of Life where the names of those who belong to the New Jerusalem are written. All those whose names were written in that Book of Life are given access to the heavenly Jerusalem. While this passage does not speak of the New Jerusalem, the comparison is still very real.

The incredible truth for us today is that if we have come to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness and experienced His salvation, our names are registered in that Book of Life. Like the people in Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah, we have been freed from the land of bondage, and our names are written in the registry of those who belong to the city. Nothing can take that citizenship from us.

Notice in verse 61 that certain individuals could not show that their families were descendants of Israel. In verse 64 some priests could not prove their priesthood by family records. These priests were forbidden to eat the sacred food or to minister until it could be established by Urim and Thummim that they were true priests of God. The Urim and Thummim were small objects carried by a priest to determine the will of the Lord in specific situations. It is possible that they were stones through which God would communicate His will and purpose. We see reference to these articles in Exodus 28:30, Leviticus 8:8 and Numbers 27:21. It is uncertain how they were used.

The number of people who were registered at that time was 42,360. Beyond this number were 7,337 servants and 245 singers. These individuals had 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels and 6720 donkeys. A record was also

made of the contributions of the governor and the heads of various families in verses 70 to 72. After this registration, the people returned to their different towns and settled down.

Nehemiah's concern was to provide Israel with a godly and mature leadership. He chose men whom he could trust to lead his people into that path of righteousness. He realized that completing the wall was not enough. If Jerusalem was to become the city it had once been, there was much work to do on the city itself. Through registering the people, it was discovered that there were individuals who could not prove their right to be priests. These individuals were removed from their position. Nehemiah's concern was for the glory of God, and he did everything in his power to facilitate obedience to the Word of the Lord and remove all that would hinder that obedience.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn about Nehemiah's concern for righteousness and integrity in the land?
- What is the connection between obedience to God and blessing in the land?
- What do we learn here about the importance of being always on guard in our walk with God?
- Why was it important that those who could not prove their priesthood be removed from their posi-

tion? How important is a call of God for Christian leaders today?

- What does this chapter teach us about the work that needs to be done in our lives after we come to know the Lord? How can we compare the city of Jerusalem to our own spiritual lives?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to restore honesty and godliness in your land. Ask Him to give you spiritual and civil leaders who are honest and live righteous lives.
- Ask God to help you to be on guard in your walk with Him.
- Ask the Lord to show you anything in your life that needs to be repaired or restored to Him. Ask Him for strength to do whatever is necessary to have victory in that area of your life.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord that He has surrounded you by the wall of salvation. Thank Him that you can have complete assurance of His salvation in your life.

18

A GATHERING IN THE SQUARE

Read Nehemiah 8:1-12

In the last chapter, Nehemiah chose leaders to minister to the people in Jerusalem. He had a deep concern, as a servant of God, to see his people walk in the ways of the Lord.

In the first part of chapter 8, the people assemble in the square before the Water Gate. From verse 2, we understand that this day was the first day of the seventh month. We discover in Leviticus 23:24 that this was a special Jewish celebration.

On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts. (Leviticus 23:24)

This day was known as the Feasts of Trumpets. It is believed to be a celebration of the civil new year.

As the people stood in the square, Ezra the priest and scribe brought out the Book of the Law of Moses. Ezra

stood on a high wooden platform with a number of religious leaders beside him. As he opened the Book of the Law, the people rose to their feet in respect. Ezra read from the Book of the Law from daybreak until noon. The people listened attentively.

God moved in power among His people. Ezra led them in praise. The people responded by raising their hands and crying "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down with their faces to the ground and worshipped. The Lord was obviously touching His people as they listened to His Word that day.

As the Word was read, the Levites circulated among the people, explaining the meaning of the Word so that it could be applied. The people were so touched by what they had heard that many of them broke down and wept before the Lord. Nehemiah challenged them to cease their grieving and have something to eat and drink. He reminded them that the joy of the Lord was their strength (verse 10).

In response, the Levites moved among the people who were grieving and helped them to calm down. The people then listened to Nehemiah and Ezra and then sat down to eat and drink. Together they celebrated with great joy because the Lord had made His Word clear to them.

There are a couple of things we need to notice. First, we need to see the exhortation of Nehemiah to those who were grieving to cease from their grief and rejoice in the Lord. Nehemiah told them that their strength was in the joy of the Lord. We need to examine this for a moment.

Those present that day were touched and very likely convicted by the words they heard from the Book of the

Law. God was revealing to them that they had fallen short of His standard. As they listened to the requirements of God, the Spirit of God convicted them. They grieved to realize that they had fallen short of God's standard. It is important that we all come to this point in our lives.

Nehemiah advised his people, however, that they move from grief to joy. Nehemiah understood that as long as God's people remained in this state of despair and brokenness, they would never advance in their walk with God. Satan knows that if he can keep believers focused only on their sin, they will never have the courage to stand up and advance the kingdom. I have met believers (and for many years I was one of them) who have not understood the nature of forgiveness. They live for years with guilt when God has covered their sin and cast it far from them.

Satan wants us to be defeated by our sin. He wants us to believe that God could never accept us or use us. Many believers are deceived by Satan's lies and do not move forward in forgiveness and renewal to accomplish great things for the kingdom.

Nehemiah reminded his people that there was victory over sin and that the joy of the Lord was their strength. This joy is our strength too. This joy comes from the knowledge of forgiveness and acceptance in the eyes of God. There is no need for us to be discouraged because God offers us victory. As unworthy as we are, we have been chosen by God. He delights in equipping and enabling us. In Him we can conquer every temptation the enemy throws at us. Satan fears believers who understand their position in Christ. He fears those who joyfully

understand that they are children of a gracious and forgiving God.

While the path of joy crosses the valley of grief, it rises beyond that valley to the mountains of acceptance, forgiveness and enabling. Beyond the cross is the resurrection. Beyond the wilderness is the Promised Land. While we must all come to an awareness of our sin, God does not want us to remain in the valley of defeat. He calls us on to the joyful experience of victory and grace.

There is one more point that we should mention in this passage. Notice that the reason for joy in the hearts of God's people is because they had come to an understanding of the truth of the Word of God. Here were people who for many years had never grasped the truth of the Word of God. That day, however, the Lord made His Word clear to them. They left that sacred assembly with a new appreciation for the wonderful privilege of having the holy Scriptures. God's Word had broken them but had also given them clear direction and guidance. The Law revealed to them the meaning of life and the purpose of God for them. Before this, God's Word meant very little to them. In some cases, it had no doubt proved a bother to them, especially when it revealed their sin. On that day, however, they rediscovered the awesomeness of the Living Word of God.

Have we understood the treasure we have to have in the Word of God? Maybe we need to rediscover the joy of this Word, as the people of Nehemiah's day.

For Consideration:

- What evidence is there here of the presence of the Spirit of God in the gathering of the people in the square by the Water Gate?
- What was the result of the reading of the Book of the Law?
- What difference does the joy of the Lord make in our life?
- What reason do we have to be joyful as believers today?
- What does this passage tell us about the power of the Word of God?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He left us with His Word in written form.
- Ask the Lord to give you a deeper appreciation for His Word.
- Thank the Lord that we have forgiveness and victory in Him.
- Ask the Lord to fill you with joy and that this joy would be a great strength to you.

19

A FORGOTTEN FEAST

Read Nehemiah 8:13-18

God had been doing a beautiful work in the lives of His people. Many had been broken by the public reading of the Word of God. There was great rejoicing in that day. The Word of God had come alive to them.

The next day the people gathered again to hear the words of the Law of God. On that occasion, they found written in the Law that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. It appears from this that the practice of living in booths had been forgotten. We read about the command of the Lord for the Israelites to live in booths in the book of Leviticus:

Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.'" (Leviticus 23:42-43)

This command of the Lord to live in booths was given through Moses. Israel was to practice the celebration yearly as a remembrance of how their ancestors lived

when they passed through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. We need to see how patient God had been with His people during the many years they had not obeyed this commandment. How thankful we ought to be to God who patiently bears with us in our disobedience and failures.

God's people were living in disobedience to His Word. They had lost the practice of celebrating the Feast of Booths. They had not been taught the truth of His Word and were living in ignorance of its principles.

When the people heard the Law of God from Ezra that day, they determined that they would obey the command of God. They went out and brought back branches to build the booths. They placed the booths anywhere they could find a place. Some set up their booths on the flat roofs of their houses. Others set them up in their courtyards. Those who did not have a place to setup their booths did so in the temple courtyard or the squares by the Water Gate and the Gate of Ephraim.

Notice in verse 17 that there was great joy among the people of God that day. There was joy in obedience to the Word of the Lord. Admittedly, there was a sacrifice to be made in leaving the comfort of their beds to live in a booth on the roof of their houses and in other places. However, the Lord's people made that sacrifice with joy in their hearts. The privilege of obedience far outweighed the sacrifice of comfort. Willing sacrifice will always bring joy to our hearts. For the seventy years of exile, God's people had been missing the privilege of celebrating this Feast of Booths. When it was rediscovered, it brought great joy and satisfaction to their hearts. For seven days the children of Israel lived in these booths and heard Ezra

read from the Book of the Law of God. On the eighth day, they gathered for a great assembly.

Nehemiah reminded the people in verse 10 that the joy of the Lord was their strength. God's intention has always been that His people experience this joy in celebration and praise of Him. This is what the people of Nehemiah's day were experiencing. May God grant that we would rediscover the joy of celebrating His goodness?

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the patience of God?
- How important is it that we remember the things God has done for us in the past? How does this help us to live in the present?
- What does this passage teach us about the joy of sacrifice?
- What do we learn about the intention of God that we live in joyful obedience?
- What is the connection between obedience and joy?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for His patience with you.

- Ask the Lord to help you rediscover joy in your walk and service for Him.
- Take a moment to remember the good things the Lord has done for you. Thank Him for these things.

REBELLIOUS PEOPLE, FAITHFUL GOD

Read Nehemiah 9:1-38

The children of Israel had rediscovered the Feast of Booths (or the Feast of Tabernacles). Beginning on the fifteenth day of the seventh month and lasting for seven days, the Israelites lived in booths made from gathered branches. They were to do this in memory of how their ancestors had lived as they wandered through the desert. On the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month, the people concluded the Feast of Booths by holding a sacred assembly with prayers, a reading of the Law, and a confession of sin (see Leviticus 23:34-36).

It was on the day of this concluding sacred assembly that the Israelites gathered (verse 1). They mourned over their sins by fasting, wearing sackcloth and throwing dust on their heads. In preparation for this day, the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners. Those who had married foreign wives separated from those wives according to the command of God. This was an assembly for the people of God. No unbeliever was to attend. Israelites that had married foreign wives or had made an

alliance with foreigners stood up and confessed their disobedience.

As the people stood before the Lord that day, the Book of the Law was read. For a quarter of the day, they listened to the reading of the Law of God. They spent another quarter of the day confessing their sins and praising God. What a beautiful day this was.

The Levites stood on the stairs and called out with loud voices to the Lord God, so all could hear. They praised God for being an everlasting having no beginning or end. They recognized that the name of the Lord their God was exalted above all blessing and praise. The Levites worshipped the Lord because He was the creator of the heavens with all their stars and the earth with all that is on it. They blessed Him as the Creator of the seas and everything in them. They confessed Him to be the creator of all the angels of heaven who praise His name.

Having recognized Him as the Creator of all things, the Levites worshiped God for His gracious role in the lives of His people. The Levites recounted a brief history of Israel for the gathered people (verses 7-31). The Levites recalled that God had chosen Abram to be His instrument. God brought him out of Ur and gave him the name of Abraham meaning "father of a multitude." God made a covenant with Abraham promising to make from him a great nation. God promised to give Abraham's descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. God kept that promise and Abraham, and his descendants settled in the region of Canaan.

When God's people were in Egypt under the cruel domination of Pharaoh, God heard their cry and set them free. He opened a door through the Red Sea and, through many signs and wonders, defeated Egypt and made a glorious name for Himself. The Lord sent His people through the divided sea on dry land, delivering them from Egypt. The Egyptians tried to follow Israel but were drowned as the waters of the sea collapsed on them.

God led His people through the desert using a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. At Mount Sinai, he gave them His laws and regulations. By following these laws, God's people would honour their God and be a light to the nations around them.

Not only did God guide His people through the wilderness, but He also provided for their basic needs of food and water. He gave them manna from heaven and water from a rock. God led His people through the wilderness to the land he had promised to Abraham. The Lord was faithful to all His promises. He cared for His people and delivered them from all their enemies.

Despite these wonderful blessings, God's people became proud and did not listen to God or obey His commands. The Israelites quickly forgot the beautiful miracles God had performed on their behalf. They were not content with what God had given them and appointed a leader to take them back to the land of slavery.

Though insulted, God was very gracious to them. Because of His love for His people, He did not desert them in their rebellion. In the desert, they made a golden calf and claimed that this idol was the god who brought them out of Egypt. Again, despite their blasphemy, God

showed great patience with them and did not destroy them.

As the Levites continued to pray aloud that day, they praised the Lord for His incredible compassion and love for His people. The Levites recalled that God's grace and mercy extended over a period of forty years when the Israelites did not lack anything. Their clothes did not wear out, and their feet become swollen.

Despite their rebellion against Him, God gave His people whole kingdoms and nations. The Israelites became a fruitful people and were blessed with many children. Their descendants became as numerous as the stars of the sky. Their children entered the land that God had promised to His people. God gave them victory over all their enemies. They took possession of homes, filled with many wonderful things. Their wells were already dug for them. In the Promised Land, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees were in abundance. The Israelites had all they needed to eat. They were well nourished and enjoyed the goodness of God in the land He had promised them.

Once again, however, they were disobedient to His Law. God sent His prophets to warn them, but they killed these prophets. In His anger, God turned them over to their enemies who oppressed them. In their oppression, they cried out to God, and He heard their request. He sent deliverers to set them free.

As soon as they had rest from their enemies, however, God's returned to their evil ways. God's blessing would again be removed from them. They again cried out to God, and He heard their request and delivered them. This cycle continued for many years.

God told them that they would be blessed only by obedience to His Word, but they chose to turn their backs on Him and His ways. They refused to listen to Him, even if it meant they would perish in their sin. Though God could have put an end to the nation, He chose to be merciful and preserve a remnant through whom He would continue to work.

As the Levites stood before the people that day and prayed, there was an awareness that they had been granted the favour of God to return to their land only because of His grace and mercy. As a people, they had rebelled repeatedly against the Lord God. They did not deserve the favour of the Lord. The Israelites who returned from exile were no better than their ancestors who had turned their backs on God and His ways. The Levites confessed that day that God was entirely just and righteous in punishing them.

Though God had granted His people the privilege of returning to their land, they were still subjects of the king of Persia. The Israelites realized that while this land should have been completely theirs, its harvests were still going to the king of Persia in tribute and taxes. The Israelites were still not where they wanted to be, as the people of God. A foreign king ruled over them and their cattle. The Jews were not content merely to return to the land. They believed that God still had more for them than what they were presently experiencing. They wanted to see an even greater work of God. They wanted complete victory and freedom from the power of the enemy in their land.

There is a powerful lesson here for us. All too many of us have been content with a Christianity that is like the city of Jerusalem on that day. The city was still in ruins. Its

inhabitants were still under the domination of a foreign king. Many Christians live like this today. They have become content to live in a sense of defeat. Their walk with God is not what it should be. Their enemy still has strongholds in their lives, but they have determined that this is normal.

The Jews of Nehemiah's day determined that they would not sit idly by and live in defeat. They decided that day to do something about their situation (verse 38). Together they made a binding agreement before God to live in obedience to His Word so that once again they could know the fullness of His victory in their lives. They understood that the source of this victory was found in obedience. May God give us Christians like this today.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the compassion and grace of God?
- What was the result of disobedience to the Lord in the lives of His people? What is the result in our lives today?
- Was God just in punishing His people for sin? Explain.
- What challenges did the Levites bring to the people of that day? Were God's people content to live in defeat?

- Have you been living in defeat as a believer today? Is there victory in your life?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for His great faithfulness even when we have rebelled against Him.
- Take a moment to confess your sin before the Lord and accept His forgiveness.
- Ask the Lord to reveal any area of spiritual defeat in your life. Ask Him for victory.
- Ask God to keep you from being content to live in defeat. Ask Him to help you to live in constant victory over the enemy and His attacks.

21

A BINDING AGREEMENT

Read Nehemiah 10:1-39

In chapter 9, the people of God celebrated the final day of the Feast of Booths. On that day, they read from the Book of the Law, praised the Lord and confessed their sin. The Levites called the people's attention to the fact that their ancestors had turned their back on God and His purposes, and they reminded the Israelites present that day that their own response had not been any better. This acknowledgment moved the people to action. Together they agreed to honour and serve the Lord faithfully. In chapter 10, we see the nature of this agreement.

Verses 1 to 29 give us a list of the people who bound themselves to this pact before God. On the top of the list are Nehemiah, and the priests (verses 1-8). This is followed by the names of the Levites and their associates (verses 9-13). Following the Levites is a list of leaders (verses 14-27) and finally, in verse 28, is a listing of the rest of the people. It was important that those who bound themselves to this agreement separated themselves from their foreign neighbours. Those who had married foreign wives or had other unhealthy associations with the unbelievers needed to break those ties before they could

enter this covenant before God. Among those who had broken this command of God were priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants as well as ordinary people. Some spiritual leaders were not living in harmony with the Law of the Lord but still serving in the temple. This displeased the Lord.

These men with their wives and children stood before the Lord and joined their brothers and sisters to bind themselves to a covenant before God. Notice in verse 29 that they bound themselves with a curse and an oath. They made their promise to God, realizing that if they turned from that promise, the curse of God would fall on them. They pledged their lives to this promise.

That day these individuals committed themselves to follow the Law of God as given through Moses. They promised to obey all the laws of God and follow every command, regulation and decree. God moved the hearts of His people to live in absolute obedience. They understood how rebellious their fathers had been. They saw clearly from the reading of the Book of the Law how the disobedience of their fathers had brought the wrath of God on their nation. That day God's people chose to do things differently.

Of note is the reference to several past failures. In verse 30, reference is made to the practice of marrying foreign wives. In those days, many men had to separate from their foreign wives. They realized that they were not living in obedience to the Lord in this matter. They confessed their sin and made a solemn vow never to marry their daughters or sons to the foreigners around them. God desired to see a people who were pure and free from the pagan practices these foreign spouses would bring to their families.

Verse 31 refers to the practice of the Sabbath. Those present with Nehemiah that day promised before God that when their neighbours brought merchandise or grain to sell in the city on the Sabbath, they would not buy it. Instead, they would honour the Sabbath and keep it as a day for worship and rest.

Also, part of the Sabbath law was the practice of allowing the land to rest every seventh year (Exodus 23:10-11). In that year, the Israelites were required to cancel all debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-2). These people committed themselves to serve the Lord no matter the cost.

Those who bound themselves to this agreement consented to give money to the work of the temple of God. They promised to bring a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of God. It is interesting to note that God commanded His people in Exodus 30:11-16 to bring one-half a shekel for the service of the temple. The people of Nehemiah's day only committed themselves to give one-third. This means that they were not giving what Moses recommended. It is quite likely that this was due to the poverty of the time and their living conditions.

Notice in verse 33 that this money would go to the purchase of bread to be set out on the table, the various animal sacrifices that took place during the year, and the numerous other expenses of the house of the Lord. The priests cast lots to determine when each family was to bring a contribution of wood to burn on the altar for the sacrifices. This responsibility was shared among the people.

In verse 35, the people committed themselves to bring the first fruits of their crops and fruit trees as an offering

to the Lord God in recognition of His provision. They also agreed to bring the firstborn of their sons and their cattle to the house of the Lord. This practice was established when the Israelites left Egypt. On that day, the Lord killed the firstborn of every family that did not have the blood of a lamb sprinkled on the doorpost (Exodus 11:1-8). From that day forward, as a commemoration of the Passover, God required His people to give Him the firstborn from the womb. Firstborn children were to be redeemed at a cost (Exodus 13:13-15).

In verse 37 the people bound themselves to bring the first of their meal, grain, fruit trees, wine and oil to the temple as an offering to the Lord. What is crucial for us to note here is that the Lord requires the first portion. Very often, we give him what is left over. Before we use anything for ourselves, God wants us to set His portion aside. He desires to have the priority in the use of our money and resources.

The people of Nehemiah's day bound themselves to give one-third of a shekel per year for the work of the temple. They also dedicated the first fruits and first born of their crops, animals and children to the Lord. They renewed their commitment to give a tithe of their crops to the work of the Lord. The Levites would gather tithes at the allotted time and placed them in the storerooms of the temple.

Other contributions were made during the year. God's people commit themselves also to bring grain, new wine and oil to the storerooms of the temple as the Lord led them. These contributions were above the other commitments they made to the Lord that day. They promise that they would not neglect God's house.

We can see that the Spirit of God was moving among His people that day. Men and women were touched by God. The result of this move of God's Spirit was that His people offered themselves afresh to Him. They commit themselves to obey God's law and willingly gave back to the Lord all He had given to them. May God give us this same heart today.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn in this chapter about the desire of the Lord God that we offer our possessions and ourselves to Him?
- Consider the sacrifices the people of Nehemiah's day were willing to make. What sacrifice are you ready to make today for the sake of the kingdom of God?
- Is there any way in which you have fallen from your first commitment to the Lord God? Do you need to renew your commitment to the Lord as did the people in Nehemiah's day?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your heart to see any area where you have fallen short in your commitment to Him.
- Thank the Lord for the blessings He has given you.

- Ask the Lord to help you to be more willing to sacrifice what He has given you for the sake of His kingdom.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the areas of your life where you have not been as faithful to Him as you should have been.
- Ask God to show you His will for the use of the resources He has given you today.

22

THE PEOPLE SETTLE IN THE LAND

Read Nehemiah 11:1-36

If the city of Jerusalem was to become the great city it had once been, it was important that the population of the city increase. There was much work to be done to repair the city. This required people with various skills and trades. The question of who was to settle in Jerusalem now had to be examined.

While it was an honour to live in the city of Jerusalem, we need to remember that land and property would be limited in the confines of the city. We also need to remember that the city of Jerusalem had been the focus of the enemy's attacks. Those living in the city would have to commit themselves to defend it. During the construction of the wall, builders had to work with swords at their sides. Those who lived in the city needed to be courageous, and work hard to rebuild the city. Not everyone would have been willing to do this. Many, no doubt, would have preferred to live in a peaceful and relatively secure towns outside of the city.

Jerusalem would be the centre of government. This meant that the leaders were to settle in the city. Because the temple was in the city, the priests and religious leaders also would also need to live in the city.

The people who willingly agreed to remain in the city of Jerusalem were commended as honourable Israelites. This was a high honour. It was bestowed on them because they were willing to put aside their own interests for the benefit of the nation. The rest of the people cast lots to determine who else would remain in the city to defend and build it up. One-tenth of the population was chosen to live in Jerusalem. The rest settled in the outlying towns and villages.

Verse 3 tells us that some of the priests, Levites and temple servants lived in the towns of Judah. Likely this was so that these towns could have religious leaders available to minister to the people there.

Verses 4-6 give us the list of individuals from Judah chosen to live in Jerusalem. In verses 7-9 is the list of descendants from Benjamin selected by lot to live in Jerusalem.

Some priests chose to live in the city as well. The names of these priests are found in verses 10 and 11. These priests had associates who helped them in their work. The names of these associates are in verses 12-14. In total 1,192 male servants helped the priests in their duties. The other Israelites, priests and Levites lived in the various towns of Judah on their ancestral properties. Temple servants living in the hill country of Ophel, Zihah and Gishpa were given charge over those living in these various towns and villages.

Uzzi, a descendant of Asaph, was the chief officer of the Levites in Jerusalem. Asaph's descendants oversaw the singers in the house of the Lord. Asaph wrote a number of Psalms (see Psalm 50 and 73-83). The temple singers were directly responsible to the king who regulated their daily activities (verse 23).

In verse 24, we read that Pethahiah was the king's agent in charge of affairs related to the people. A list of villages where the people of Judah lived is found in verse 25-30. Seventeen cities or towns are mentioned here in these verses. Fifteen towns are listed in verses 31-36 where the descendants of Benjamin lived. Some Levites from Judah also lived with the tribe of Benjamin in their cities and villages.

We have here a clear record of how the people who returned from exile settled in the land. There was a definite order in this matter. Of primary importance for the people was that the city of Jerusalem became a visible witness to the glory of God. Everyone was given access to a priest who could lead them in the worship of the Lord God. As these people of God settled in the land, they realized that the work of rebuilding had only begun. There was much work ahead of them if they were to restore the nation of Israel to its former glory.

For Consideration:

- What sacrifices were made by those who lived in Jerusalem? What were their responsibilities in the city?
- What is the response of the people to those who volunteered to live in the city? What is our responsibility toward those who commit themselves to minister on our behalf?
- Notice that that priests and Levites settled in the various towns and villages. What does this tell us about the importance of communities having a servant of God in their midst? Why was this important?
- Are their towns and villages in your region that do not have a minister of the gospel? What is the challenge of this passage in this regard?

For Prayer:

- The people of Israel commended those who were willing to live in the city of Jerusalem as their servants to protect the city and build it up. Who are your servants today? Take a moment to lift them to the Lord.
- Are their towns and villages in your area that do not have a servant of the Lord to minister to them? Ask God to send a faithful servant to share the message of the Gospel with them and to build them up in the faith.

- Ask the Lord to help you to be willing to make the necessary sacrifices for His kingdom. Thank the Lord for your spiritual leaders who have sacrificed much for the sake of the Lord.

23

A CEREMONY AT THE WALL

Read Nehemiah 12:1-47

Chapter 12 begins with a list of priests and Levites who returned from exile. It should be noted here that there appears to have been different waves of returning exiles to the land of Jerusalem. In chapter 7 we have a list of the first group that returned under Zerubbabel. The record in chapter 12 appears to be selective and doesn't include the names of every person who returned at that time. Notice that Ezra is mentioned in verse 1. Verses 1-7 give us a list of the principle priests of that day.

Verses 8-11 list the names of the principle Levites. The Levites were assistants to the priests in the ministry of the temple. The Levites and their assistants mentioned in verse 8 oversaw singing songs of thanksgiving to the Lord.

Verses 12-22 give us the names of the heads of the priestly families. Verses 22-23 tell us the location and time in which the leaders of the Levite families were recorded. The Levites mentioned in these verses had the responsibility of singing in the service of worship. We see from verse 24 that they sang opposite each other. One

section of musicians responded to the other in song as David had prescribed.

The final list in this chapter is that of principle gatekeepers who were responsible for guarding the storerooms at the gates of the temple. Even gatekeepers were important in the work of the temple. No one was insignificant in this work. Each person had a specific role to fill in the temple, and every task was essential and necessary.

In verse 27, we read about the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem. On the day of the dedication, the Levites came to Jerusalem. Obviously, they came to help the people worship the Lord who had given them victory over their enemies. These Levites led the people in songs and played the cymbals, harps and lyres. Singers were also brought from the surrounding areas for this special occasion. These singers had built villages for themselves around the city of Jerusalem (verse 29).

The priests and Levites purified themselves according to the Law of Moses. Then they purified the people, the gates, and the wall to commit them to the Lord and His service. Nehemiah had the leaders of Judah go on top of the wall with two large choirs. Each choir was to walk on the top of the wall in opposite directions. Ezra led one of the groups (verse 36). Nehemiah followed the second group in the opposite direction. As the choirs walked on the wall around the city, they sang praises to God and played their musical instruments to His honour. The city was surrounded by praise. As they walked on top of the wall, they declared publicly that the Lord God had given them victory. They declared Him to be Lord in the city of Jerusalem.

The choirs then met in the temple and continued to sing and play their instruments in praise of the Lord God. Verse 43 tells us that they also offered sacrifices to the Lord that day with great joy. So great was the sound of rejoicing that the praise could be heard far away. This was a day for praising the Lord. Against all the odds, they had achieved what their enemies said they could not achieve. They had persevered and overcome the enemy's obstacles.

Certain men were given charge of the storerooms where the contributions, first fruits, and tithes of God's people would be kept until they were required for the service of the temple. God's people were to bring in their offerings to these storerooms as the Law required.

From verse 45 we see that the singers and the gatekeepers were to be purified or set apart for the ministry to which the Lord had called them. They were to keep themselves pure in the work of the Lord. The offerings of God's people would be used to provide for these individuals in their service for the Lord.

As we examine this chapter, we see the order that existed in the work of the Lord. Each person had a responsibility from the Lord. God's people were to be sure to provide for their temple workers so that the work of the temple would not suffer. The temple workers were to be pure and holy as they served the Lord their God. In all this, the Lord was to be glorified. The temple was a place of music, worship and celebration. Instruments and singers faithfully led in the worship of the Lord and the dedication of the wall. There was great joy and celebration that day. We too have much reason to celebrate the Lord. Our worship of Him ought to be a celebration of victory. It ought to be a joyous experience. He is Lord and

He has conquered all opposition. We share in that victory. This is a reason for great rejoicing.

For Consideration:

- What role does music play in the Old Testament worship? How important is music in the worship of our God today?
- Notice how God wanted ample provisions for the work of the temple. Does the work of God suffer in our day for lack of finances? What can you do to ease this?
- What significance was there in walking around the wall, praising the Lord with music? Is it important that the unbeliever recognize us as a people of praise? Explain.
- God's people had much to thank Him for on the day they dedicated the walls of Jerusalem. What do you have to be thankful for today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to guide and provide for the leaders of your church. Ask Him to show you how He would have you use your finances.
- The temple servants needed to be purified as they began their task. Ask God to keep you pure and holy as His servant.

- What victories has the Lord God given you? Take a moment to praise and thank the Lord for those victories.
- Ask the Lord to help you never to be ashamed of praising Him and declaring His glory and goodness to all those around you.

24

HOUSECLEANING

Read Nehemiah 13:1-31

It is quite likely that the events recorded in this final chapter of Nehemiah occurred sometime after the renewal that took place in the land during his first visit. Nehemiah returned to his responsibilities in Persia under the king and after some time, came back to visit Jerusalem to see how things were going (see verses 6-7). During the time of his absence, the people of Jerusalem had allowed their situation to deteriorate. They had not persevered in their walk with God and in obedience to the binding agreement they had made with Him. Nehemiah was very disappointed with what he saw on his return to Jerusalem. He took it on himself to do some spiritual house cleaning.

There are five situations mentioned here in this chapter that give us an idea of what had happened over the course of time in the land of Israel. We will briefly examine each of these situations.

Removal of the Ammonites and Moabites from the Assembly (verses 1-3)

On one occasion as the Book of Moses was being read aloud, it was discovered that no Ammonite or Moabite was ever to be allowed into the assembly of God. The reason for this can be found in Numbers 22. There we read that when the children of Israel had camped on the Plains of Moab (after they had travelled for forty years through the wilderness and just before entering the Promised Land), the Moabites hired Balaam, to curse Israel. God took this matter very seriously and judged Moab by forbidding them to enter His presence. The Lord refused to accept their worship. Ammon, Moab's neighbour, was also included in this command of God. Deuteronomy 23:3-4 tells us that both the Moabites and the Ammonites were forbidden access to the congregation of Israel because they refused to meet Israel with bread and water on their way out of Egypt and because they hired Balaam to curse Israel (Numbers 22).

Notice in verse 2 that God refused to allow Balaam to curse Israel. The Lord even turned the intended curse into a blessing. The people of Moab, however, were still accountable to God for their evil intentions.

When the people of Israel heard how God had forbidden any Moabite or Ammonite to be in the assembly of His people, they removed the Ammonites and Moabites from their midst. They also withdrew from every person of foreign descent. No foreigner was permitted to enter the place of worship.

God desires absolute purity in service and worship. This is not to say that the doors of our church should be shut to unbelievers. What we do need to understand here is

that in the ministry of the kingdom, God wants those who know and love Him to serve. There are church leaders all over the world who do not even know the Lord. There are Sunday school teachers who are not living in a relationship with God but still teaching children. God desires that His children advance His kingdom. This is not the responsibility of the unbeliever. Israel had compromised in this area. Nehemiah had to deal with this matter upon his return to Jerusalem.

Removal of Tobiah (verses 4-9)

The second matter Nehemiah had to correct related to the use of the storerooms in the temple. A priest by the name of Eliashib had been given charge of these storerooms. The storerooms were designed to hold the tithes, offerings and first fruits offered by the people for the service of the Lord.

It seems that Eliashib was closely associated with Tobiah, an Ammonite and very bitter enemy of Nehemiah (2:10). Tobiah did much to hinder the work on the wall surrounding the city (4:7-8), and he had also gained the favour of the Jewish nobles (6:17). Tobiah had also befriended Eliashib, the priest who provided Tobiah with a large storeroom in the temple of God. Tobiah moved into this room and was living there when Nehemiah returned from Persia. When Nehemiah discovered what Eliashib the priest had done, he was much displeased. Nehemiah would have been angry for several reasons. First, Tobiah was an Ammonite and should not have been allowed in the temple. Second, Tobiah had been one of the greatest enemies to the building of the wall of Jerusalem. Third, the storerooms were intended for the storage of tithes, offerings and first fruits. This room

should have been filled with the gifts of God's people so that the work of the temple would not be hindered.

Nehemiah did not waste time here. He went into the storeroom and threw out Tobiah's household goods. He then ordered that the rooms be purified. Nehemiah had the temple equipment put back along with the grain offerings and incense. He restored this room to its original purpose.

Restoring of Portions Assigned to the Levites (verse 10-14)

Nehemiah learned that the portions allocated to the temple workers had not been given to them. God's people were not bringing their offerings to the temple. This meant that temple workers had to work the land to have enough to live. The ministry of the temple suffered as a result.

Nehemiah rebuked the officials of the land because of this neglect. They were convicted of their sin and brought their tithes, grain, new wine and oil offerings to the storerooms. Nehemiah then put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe and Pedaiah the Levite in charge of the storerooms. He also made Hanan an assistant. He did this because he knew them to be trustworthy. These men were responsible for distributing supplies to their brothers in the service of the temple.

Restoring of the Sabbath (verse 15-22)

Nehemiah noticed that there were men in Judah who were treading the winepresses on the Sabbath. They were also bringing in grain and loading donkeys with

grapes, figs and other loads. The Sabbath was a commanded day of rest for Israel. The Book of Moses forbade anyone from doing work on that day. These individuals were ignoring the commandment of God.

Nehemiah also noticed that the merchants of Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and other merchandise into the city and selling it on the Sabbath to the people of Israel. Seeing this, Nehemiah rebuked the nobles and reminded them of how their ancestors brought on themselves the wrath of God for doing the same thing. By ignoring the law of God, they were stirring up God's righteous anger.

When the next Sabbath evening came, Nehemiah ordered the city doors to be closed and not opened until the Sabbath was over. He stationed men at the gates so that nothing could be brought into the city on that day. Once or twice, merchants came to sell their goods but were forced to spend the night outside the city. Nehemiah warned these merchants that if they came again on the Sabbath, he would personally lay hands on them. The merchants decided to no longer come on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath Law was to give God's people time to focus their attention on Him. God's people were to learn to trust Him more. On this one day out of seven, they were to refrain from work. One year out of seven, they were not to plant their fields. God promised to take care of them in these times. By observing His commandments, God's people would know His blessing on their lives and recognize Him as their provider.

Renouncing Foreign Marriages (verses 23-29)

Finally, Nehemiah noticed that there were men in Judah who had married foreign wives. He also saw that half of their children spoke a foreign language and did not even know how to speak the language of Judah. This greatly disturbed Nehemiah. The language and faith of Israel were not being passed on to the next generation. This broke Nehemiah's heart.

Verse 25 tells us that he rebuked these individuals and called down curses on them. He took some aside and beat them, pulling out their hair. In the culture of Israel, when a man shaved his hair, he was humbling himself. Nehemiah not only beats these individuals to punish them for their sin but he also pulled out their hair so that they would be put to shame for their evil. He then made them take an oath that they would never give their daughters or sons to marry any foreigner. Neither were they to marry any foreign wives. He reminded them that it was because of this very sin that Solomon fell into sin (1 Kings 11:4).

Notice in verse 28 that one of the sons of Joiada, son of Eliashib, the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. Sanballat was not only a foreigner but also worked with Tobiah to hinder the work of the wall. Nehemiah drove this young man from Israel. It grieved Nehemiah that even the priests had been guilty of permitting their children to marry foreigners. As priests, they were under a special obligation before God to honour His covenant.

During his time in Jerusalem, Nehemiah restored obedience to God's laws. He removed the detestable practices from the land, purified the priests and placed people in

spiritual leadership to assure that the Law of God would be observed.

What ought to strike us here is how quickly God's people wandered from the truth of His Word. Very rapidly, they began to compromise their faith. Soon the Law was twisted to suit their preferences. Eventually, they turned completely from the Lord's commands.

We need to praise the Lord for men and women like Nehemiah who were concerned for the truth of God's Word. Nehemiah's heart was broken by the evil he saw in the land, and he refused to compromise. He would not accept anything but complete obedience to the Word of God. Nehemiah was not afraid of what others would think of him when he stood up for truth and discipline. All too many of us have become so blind to what is happening around us; we hardly notice evil in the land.

Could it be that we need to look deep inside our hearts and take a spiritual inventory? Maybe our churches need to experience a spiritual cleansing. Nehemiah seems harsh in this passage. However, this is how we need to be when it comes to sin in our midst. We need more people like Nehemiah who will not stand for sin but will root it out for the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom, no matter the cost.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the importance of purity among the people of God?

- Are their commands of God that we have trouble obeying? What are they?
- What do we learn from Nehemiah about the seriousness of sin?
- What foreign influences have come into our lives today?
- To what extent do you feel we have missed the blessing of God because we have failed to take sin as seriously as we should?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to pass on your faith to your own children. Take a moment to pray for them and their walk with God.
- Ask God to reveal anything in you that does not bring Him honour and glory.
- Ask the Lord to give you seriousness when it comes to sin. Ask Him to help you to see sin as Nehemiah did.
- Ask God to give you strength to obey Him no matter the cost.

INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER

Author:

The author of the book of Esther is unknown. There is nothing in this book that would give any clue as to its authorship. The details recorded in the book, however, indicate that the author was close enough to the characters and events to know what was happening. It is supposed that book was written shortly after these events took place by someone close to Esther.

Background:

Esther is the main character of the story. She was a Jew born with the name Hadassah. Esther 2:7 tells us that she was raised by her cousin Mordecai because she had no father or mother. She would be better known by her name Esther. She lived at the time when the Jews had returned to their homeland to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. For some reason, she and Mordecai did not return to Israel choosing instead to stay in Persia.

When King Xerxes divorced his wife, a search was made of the entire kingdom for a new queen. Esther was brought into the harem of King Xerxes. She found favour with the king, and he chose her to be his wife. In this capacity as queen, God used Esther to crush a plan to destroy the Jewish nation.

Many commentators take note of the fact that the name of God is not mentioned at all in this book. While the Lord's name is not mentioned, however, there is powerful evidence of His presence in the book.

Importance of the Books for Today:

The sovereign working of God is evident in the book of Esther. We see the events of Esther's life working out to accomplish the purpose of God for her nation even though there is evidence that she was not as aware of Him and His requirements.

One cannot help but notice how God uses human decisions to accomplish His will. Mordecai and Esther chose to stay in Persia. The king's officials decided to seek a wife for the king. Xerxes chose Esther to be his wife. Those who were making these decisions were not aware that God was working out His purposes. What comfort this ought to give us in our day. God is over every human decision and will accomplish His purposes.

Esther was an orphan raised by her cousin in a foreign land. She may not have been well educated in the ways of God and appeared to fall into circumstances that were less than favourable in life, ending up in the harem of a Persian king. She would eventually marry a divorced unbeliever (something that God forbade in his law). Who would have thought that the Lord God would use this woman to accomplish His purposes? God's ways are very different from our ways. He uses people we would not expect He would use. The book gives us cause to reflect on how we treat those around us who have made bad decisions in life and who have found themselves in less than favourable circumstances. God still has a purpose for their lives.

God is over our circumstances. He is bigger than the problems we find ourselves in today. He can use the decisions we have made (even the bad ones!) to accomplish greater things than we could ever expect. Esther is the story of how a Jewish orphan was raised up by God to save His nation from destruction. It is a story that ought to inspire our faith and encourage us to step out more boldly into the purpose God has set out for our lives.

25

THE DISOBEDIENCE OF QUEEN VASHTI

Read Esther 1:1-22

The events of the book of Esther take place while God's people were in exile for their sin. The Persians were the dominant world power, having conquered the Babylonians. The reigning king of the time was King Xerxes. Verse 1 gives us an idea of the extent of his reign and power. He ruled over 127 provinces in a territory that stretched from India to the region of Ethiopia (Cush).

It was in the third year of his reign that Xerxes prepared a banquet for his nobles and officials. On that occasion, the military leaders of Persia and Media and the princes of his provinces were present. The celebration was to last for six months (180 days). During that time, the king displayed the wealth of his kingdom to all who were present. Xerxes basked in his pride and arrogance. He openly displayed how rich and powerful he was. His officials would have been impressed by their king and his power. The show of power and wealth would have put a fear in the hearts of the nobles and officials. Their king was like a god to them.

When the lengthy celebration was over, Xerxes gave a great banquet lasting seven days in the enclosed garden of his palace. The banquet was open for everyone in the citadel at Susa, whether they were rich or poor. The garden was richly decorated for this celebration with hangings of white and blue linen. These hangings were fastened to marble pillars by white linen cords and silver rings (verse 6). The pavement was made from porphyry (a rock containing crystal formations and usually purple), marble, mother of pearl and precious stones. Beautiful couches of gold and silver were scattered here and there on this pavement.

The wine was served in abundance in goblets of gold. Every goblet was a work of art with no two goblets being the same. The king ordered that all guests be permitted to drink as much as they wished. We can only imagine the scene that day as guests drank all the wine they wanted. Drunkenness and all that comes with it would have been very noticeable that week. Queen Vashti, the wife of King Xerxes, offered a banquet for the women at the same time in a separate location.

By the seventh day, King Xerxes found his spirits high from wine. At that time, he commanded seven eunuchs who served him to bring Queen Vashti before him wearing her royal crown. He wanted to show her beauty to the drunken nobles who were present. When the servants told Vashti the king's command, Vashti refused to go.

While we are not told why Queen Vashti refused to obey the king's command, it would seem quite evident that she was a respectable woman who did not wish to parade herself before a band of drunken men. This was not only

beneath her dignity as a woman but also as a queen and example to other women in the community.

Vashti's refusal to obey the command of the king was an embarrassment to Xerxes. He was the most powerful king on the earth, but his wife refused to bow to his command. This was especially embarrassing and dangerous because all the nobles were present that day to witness this challenge to his power. Xerxes consulted experts in the law and wise men that understood the times and asked them what should be done in such a case.

Memucan told the king in verse 16 that Queen Vashti had wronged every noble and citizen of the king's provinces. He reminded King Xerxes that every woman in the nation would hear of the queen's conduct. They would follow her example and disrespect their husbands. Memucan advised the king to issue a royal decree and make it a law that Vashti never again be permitted to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Everything that belonged to Queen Vashti was to be taken from her; her position was to be given to someone else. Memucan believed that by doing this, King Xerxes would make an example of Queen Vashti so that when the women of the nation saw what happened to her, they would learn to respect their husbands.

Those present at the banquet were pleased with the advice of Memucan. The king acted on Memucan's advice and stripped Vashti of her position. Dispatches were sent to all the provinces to share the news of Vashti's demise and to command that every man should be the ruler of his household.

There are a few points we need to consider in this chapter. First, this chapter calls us to examine the question of whether Vashti was right in what she did that day. Should Vashti have appeared before those drunken men just because her husband asked her to do so? Does headship in a family mean that the man can ask his wife to do whatever he wants (even when he is under the influence of much wine) and she is required to obey him? In this situation, Vashti was not willing to violate her moral principles. For her to display herself before these lustful and drunken nobles was not only beneath her dignity but would have violated a higher principle of morality.

In matters of personal preference, we need to be willing to submit to those who are over us. There are times, however, when we are asked to go against a higher moral or spiritual principle. In these cases, we should be willing to disobey and suffer the consequences. The general principle, whether in marriage, work, or laws of the land is that we respect and obey those who are over us. If I am at work, however, and my boss asks me to do something immoral or dishonest, I am obliged to obey God rather than my boss. It would seem to me that Vashti did what was right and proper in her situation. She was also willing to suffer the consequences of her disobedience.

Notice second, that sometimes even the righteous will suffer for doing what is right. We must be prepared for this. As servants of God, we will enter conflict with the standards of this world. We need to be ready to suffer for doing what is right.

We will see the final point as we move through this story of Esther. Queen Vashti's removal from her position

would open the door for Esther to become queen. Through Esther, God would save the nation of Israel from destruction. What we need to understand here is that God will use this event to accomplish His purposes in Israel. God's ways are quite strange at times. God blessed Vashti's decision. He needed to remove her so that His objectives could be accomplished. We will examine how this takes place in the rest of this book.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about God's ways? How does God use the removal of Queen Vashti to accomplish His purpose?
- What do we discover in this chapter about the spiritual climate in the days of Xerxes?
- The Bible makes it quite clear that we are to be submissive to those who are in authority over us (see Romans 13). What should we do in a situation where the requests of those in authority over us enter into conflict with the moral and spiritual commands of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you the grace to honour and obey those in authority over you.
- Ask God for strength and willingness to suffer for doing what is right.

- Take a moment to pray for those who are suffering today because they have done what was right.

26

IN SEARCH OF A QUEEN

Read Esther 2:1-17

In the first chapter of this book, we saw how Queen Vashti was relieved of her position as queen. Her husband King Xerxes was not only under the influence of much wine at the time but was publicly embarrassed before the nobles who had come to his celebrations. When King Xerxes came to his senses, he realized what he had done. Verse 2 tells us that the king's attendants proposed that a search be made for a beautiful young virgin to get the king's mind off Queen Vashti. The hope was that this would cheer up the king.

The proposal was made that commissioners in every province in Xerxes' realm bring the most beautiful young virgins of their province to Susa to be part of the king's harem. They were to be placed under the care of the king's eunuch, a servant by the name of Hegai. He was to look after their beauty treatments and prepare them to meet the king. Given the size of the king's realm (from India to Ethiopia) this matter would have taken some time and required considerable effort.

The king's attendants proposed that the king examine each of these young virgins and select one of them to

become queen in the place of Vashti. The king was quite delighted with this proposal, and so he issued the decree.

In Susa lived a Jewish man by the name of Mordecai. He had been carried into exile when Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and brought back its choicest citizens to work for him as servants. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah. This girl had lost her father and mother, and so he brought her up as his own child. Although Hadassah was a cousin to Mordecai, it is quite evident that she was very much younger.

Hadassah was also known as Esther. Hadassah was her Jewish name meaning "myrtle." Esther was her Persian name meaning "star." Esther, as she will be known throughout the rest of this book, was very beautiful. As such, she was a prime candidate for the king's harem. When the decree was issued, Esther along with many other girls were brought to the citadel and put under the care of Hegai the king's eunuch.

There was something particularly pleasing about Esther. She won Hegai's favour. Seeing her beauty and grace, he immediately began her beauty treatment. He also put her on a special diet. Esther was given seven maids to care for her needs and moved to the best place in the harem. Obviously, the hand of God was on her.

Many men and women of faith saw the favour of God on them in such a way. Joseph experienced this in his time in Potiphar's house (Genesis 9:4). Nehemiah experienced the favour of God when he approached the king to ask for permission to return to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:5). The early church experienced this favour in the eyes of the unbelievers (Acts 2:47). Jesus experienced

favour with both God and man (Luke 2:52). When God wants to accomplish His purposes, He will sometimes give us favour with those to whom He is sending us. Certainly, this is the case with Esther.

When Esther had left for the king's harem, Mordecai told her that she was not to reveal her nationality. To admit that she was a Jew in that time would have put her at a disadvantage. The Jews were a conquered people. They were servants and did not have the same status as those of the region. We will discover in the course of this story that the fact that her nationality was hidden would work out to her advantage and ultimately bring great victory to the Jews. God had every detail worked out. Even the hiding of her identity would prove to be important.

Though Esther was no longer living in his home, Mordecai still was very concerned for her. Verse 11 tells us that every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how she was doing and what was happening to her. Apparently, he loved Esther very much and was genuinely concerned about her situation.

Meanwhile, Hegai was busy preparing the girls to see the king. Before a girl could see the king, she would have to undergo twelve months of beauty treatment. For six months, she was treated with the oil of myrrh, very likely to soften the skin. In the remaining six months, special perfumes and cosmetics were applied to her skin.

When the day came for the young virgin to appear before the king, she was permitted to take anything she wanted from the harem. Likely, what this verse means is that she was permitted to take whatever jewellery or clothing she desired to make her impression on the king. The young virgin would go to the king in the evening and stay with

him throughout the night. In the morning, she would return to another part of the harem. After returning from the king, she would be placed under the direction of Shaashgaz, another one of the king's eunuchs who oversaw all the king's concubines. These women were to remain under the care of Shaashgaz and would not see the king again unless he called for them by name. Adam Clarke, in his comments on Esther 2:14, tells us that after this the concubine would never be given in marriage to another man. (*Adam Clarke, Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible: Esther 2:14, Formatted for Palm Bible+ ver.2.47. Under GNU GPL license*). While they would be well cared for, these women were to be reserved for the king alone but only permitted to enter his presence when called for by name.

When Esther's turn came to see the king, she listened carefully to the advice of Hegai. She was taken to see the king on the tenth month of the seventh year of Xerxes' reign. When the king met Esther, he was attracted to her. She won his special favour and approval. He was pleased to put the royal crown on her head so that she became queen in place of Queen Vashti.

In all of this, we see the work of a sovereign God. Vashti was removed from her position so that Esther could take her place. While the whole nation is involved in this process, God was over all. He worked out all the events to accomplish His purposes. Esther becomes the queen of the most powerful nation on the earth. The hand of God was moving and granting favour to Esther. She willingly stepped out in that favour and passed through the doors God was opening for her. God is setting up the scene to accomplish the salvation of His people. Even before His people are in need, God prepared a solution.

What a wonderful thought this is. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says:

Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. (Isaiah 65:24)

God knows what our needs will be even before we have those needs. He has already prepared the solutions to our future problems. Our prayers are already answered in the mind of God. The Lord is arranging circumstances and situations so that those prayers can be answered. How we need to thank the Lord that He cares for us in this way.

For Consideration:

- How does God prepare the way for Esther to accomplish His purposes? What encouragement do you take from this in your own life and ministry?
- Who does God use to accomplish His purpose of making Esther queen? Are these people aware that they are the instruments of God to bring salvation to His people? What does this tell us about God?
- What encouragement do you find in the fact that the Lord has prepared answers to problems of His people even before there is any evidence of these problems?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is a sovereign God who works out all things according to His purposes.
- Thank the Lord that He knows what you need before you even have the need. Thank Him that He is working out the solution to the problems you have not yet faced.
- Ask God to give you favour with those who are between you and the accomplishing of His purpose for your life.

HAMAN AND MORDECAI

Read Esther 2:18-3:15

By the grace of God, Esther had become queen in the land of Persia. Unknown to her and the Jews of that day, God was preparing the scene for a terrible declaration that would threaten to exterminate them as a people in the land of Persia.

In verse 18, King Xerxes prepared a grand banquet in honour of his new wife. He assembled his nobles and officials and proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces of his land. Gifts were given with liberality. Xerxes seems to have been a man of great extravagance.

During the time of the celebrations, Mordecai was sitting outside the king's gate. As he sat there, two of the king's officers who guarded the gate became very angry and planned to kill King Xerxes. Mordecai heard about the plot and told Queen Esther who reported it to Xerxes and gave credit to Mordecai. When the report was investigated and discovered to be true, the two officials were hanged. The incident was recorded in the records in the presence of the king. At that time, nothing was done to reward Mordecai, but all this was in God's hand. The time

would come when Mordecai would be rewarded—but not yet. God's timing is not like ours.

After this event, King Xerxes honoured a man by the name of Haman and gave him a position that was higher than any of the other nobles. The king commanded that everyone should honour Haman. Wherever he went, people would kneel and pay their respects to him. Mordecai, however, refused to pay him honour.

We may legitimately ask why Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman. The answer may be found in the command the king gave to his people concerning Haman. Verse 2 tells us that the king commanded his people to "honour" Haman. The Hebrew word here is the word "*shachah*" which can mean to worship or reverence. It is quite likely that Haman was expecting to be worshipped as a god. If this is the case, the reason why Mordecai refused to bow down was that, as a Jew, Mordecai would only bow the knee in worship of the God of Israel. Mordecai willingly risked his life to be obedient to the command of the Lord God of Israel.

The refusal of Mordecai to bow down and worship Haman perplexed the royal officials at the king's gate. They would ask him why he refused to obey the command of the king and risk his life. Each day they tried to persuade him to bow down before Haman, but Mordecai continually refused.

Verse 4 tells us that Mordecai revealed to the royal officials that he was a Jew. This is important. Could it be that the reason why Mordecai was compelled to disclose this fact was because he was explaining to the officials

that, as a Jew, it was against his faith to bow down to anyone but the one true God?

On hearing his explanation, the officials went to Haman and told him what Mordecai had said. It may be that they wondered if leniency would be given to him because of his faith. Haman was furious when he heard that Mordecai refused to kneel despite repeated efforts of the officials to convince him to do so. When Haman heard that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire. This decision was made partly because of Mordecai, but we should not see this as the only reason for the decision of Haman. Haman hated the Jews because he saw them as an obstacle to his aspirations of being honoured as a god.

It should be noted here that Haman was an Agagite (3:1). Agag was an Amalekite King in the days when Saul was king of Israel (1 Samuel 15). After an attack on the Amalekites, King Saul spared Agag. This angered God who had commanded Saul to destroy this people. God sent His prophet Samuel to confront Saul about this matter. Samuel, himself, became the instrument of God's judgment and killed Agag with the sword. The Amalekites continued to be an enemy of Israel (1 Samuel 30). Haman would have been aware of this history, and this may also have been a motivation for him to seek revenge on the Jews.

With the decision fixed in his mind, Haman needed only to decide when and how he should execute his plan to exterminate the Jews. To determine this, he cast the *pur*. That is to say; he cast "lots." We are not told how this was done. It could be that they rolled a dice or did something of this nature to fix the month when his evil

plan was to be carried out. Casting the pur may even have been part of a religious ceremony.

When the month was fixed, Haman went to King Xerxes and revealed his plan to him. Haman told the king of a people whose ideas and customs were different than theirs. He told Xerxes of how the Jews refused to obey the king's laws. This might lead us to believe that Mordecai was not the only one to refuse to bow down to Haman. Haman advised the king that it would be in his interest to destroy these people.

Haman hid his hate of Mordecai in the guise of loyalty to the king. Haman even offered to put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who would carry out this plan and proposed that a decree be issued to this effect.

Xerxes took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman. The ring was a symbol of authority. It was used to stamp official documents. When the king gave his ring to Haman, he was in effect giving him the right to carry out his evil plot. Notice in verse 11 that King Xerxes placed full confidence in Haman. He told him to keep his money but to do whatever he felt was necessary with the Jews.

Very little time was wasted in this matter. On the thirteenth day of that same month, secretaries were assembled to write out the king's decree in the various languages of the people. The orders were then sealed with the king's signet ring and made official.

Messengers were sent to all the king's provinces with the order to annihilate all Jews. No Jew was to be spared.

Young, old, women and little children were to be killed. This was to happen in a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. Everyone was to be ready to perform this terrible deed on that day and then plunder all the possessions of the murdered Jews.

Having issued his decree, Haman and the king sat down to drink. The city of Susa, however, was confused by this horrible command. Behind it was a very evil, jealous and proud mind. Controlling all this evil, however, was a sovereign God who knew what would happen. Even then, God was working out His plan to defend His people. While the king and Haman drank together in celebration, God prepared the defeat of all their purposes.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the courage of Mordecai?
- Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were tempted to hide or compromise in your faith? What challenge does Mordecai bring to us?
- Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you felt that things were completely out of control and all hope was lost? What encouragement do you see here in the fact that though outwardly, things do appear to be very terrible, God is still working behind the scenes?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you the courage to stand firm in your walk with Him.
- Thank the Lord that He is a sovereign God who controls the future.
- Thank God that no matter how difficult things appear, in Him there is always hope.

28

IF I PERISH, I PERISH

Read Esther 4:1-17

The plan to exterminate the Jews had been decreed. Messengers travelled to the far corners of the Persian Empire to issue the order that on a particular day all citizens were to rise up to kill the Jews and plunder their possessions.

The news of this plot reached Mordecai. When he learned of about Haman's plan, he tore off his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning, and went out into the city wailing bitterly. The burden would have been particularly great for Mordecai because he understood that it was because of his refusal to bow down to Haman that this evil had come to them as a nation. He may have wondered why the Lord would have permitted this to happen when he had been faithful in keeping the Lord's commandments. What made matters worse was that he could only go as far as the king's gate because no one who was dressed in sackcloth and ashes was allowed to enter. This meant that he did not have access either to the king to petition him for mercy or to Esther who could have seen the king on his behalf.

There was a similar response everywhere the decree was read. The Jews in all the provinces mourned, fasted and wept with sackcloth and ashes. God's people turned to Him in this time of trouble. They had nowhere to turn but to the Lord, so they fasted and sought His mercy.

It was Esther's maids and eunuchs who came and told her about Mordecai. On learning that Mordecai was dressed in sackcloth, Esther sent clothes for him to put on. Apparently, she did not know what it was that was troubling Mordecai. Mordecai refused the clothes.

Esther understood that something very serious was disturbing Mordecai. She called Hathach, one of the eunuchs assigned to attend to her, and commanded him to speak to Mordecai to find out what was worrying him. Hathach did as he was commanded and learned about the plot to kill the Jews. Mordecai gave Hathach a copy of the decree for the annihilation of the Jews. Through Hathach, Mordecai pleaded with Esther to approach the king to ask for mercy and beg him to save her people. We need to see here that while Mordecai did not have direct access to Esther now that she was queen, God opened a door for him to speak to her through her servant Hathach.

When Esther received the report from Hathach, she sent him back to remind Mordecai that the custom of the royal court stated that no man or woman was ever permitted to approach the king in his inner court without first being summoned. Anyone who did so would be put to death unless, at that moment, the king extended his sceptre to them and spared their life. Esther reminded Mordecai that she had not been called to see the king and to see him without being summoned would be to risk her life.

Esther is not sure what she was to do. She obviously grieved for her people and Mordecai, but if the king was not pleased with her, she would be killed and not be of any benefit to her people. When Mordecai heard what Esther had to say, he told her that she would not be spared just because she was in the king's house. Mordecai was telling her that her life was also in danger. Once it was discovered that she was a Jew, the king would be forced to kill her to obey his own decree. Whether or not she approached the king, her life was in danger. Mordecai went on to remind Esther that if she remained silent at this time, God could raise up deliverance from another source but she and her household would perish. He told her that it might have been for this very purpose that she was queen.

Mordecai's response is very wise. There are several things we should notice in his response. First, notice that Mordecai reminded Esther that she was in danger herself. It may be that Esther had become comfortable in her situation. She was living with a false sense of security. She believed that because she was queen, she would be spared. Mordecai made her realize that this was not the case. She was in danger whether she saw it or not. Esther wasn't sure if she should risk her life. Mordecai reminded her that she if she did not do something, she would perish even though she was queen.

Many people live today with false security. They believe that because they go to church or because they accepted Jesus as their Saviour, they will not have to answer to God for their actions. The reality of the matter is that we will all have to answer to God on that final Day of Judgment.

Second, notice that Mordecai believed in deliverance. He realized that the situation looked very dismal. He did not know how the Lord was going to set His people free from this evil plot, but he spoke of God's deliverance for His people. Mordecai believed that Esther could be the answer to this problem. He told her, however, that if she did not do something, God would raise up someone else to be the deliverer.

God can use anyone to accomplish His purposes. Mordecai believed that Esther was the instrument of God, but he did not place his faith in her. It was God who would deliver not Esther. If she refused to take on the responsibility, God would find someone else.

God is preparing us for a particular ministry. The circumstances He has put you through, and the trials you have had to bear are all preparation for that ministry. Not everyone accepts God's calling, however. Some people are disobedient. Some are fearful. If we do not step out, we will suffer significant loss. We will not see the fruit that God intended for our lives. We will suffer spiritually. God's purposes will not be hindered, however. He is fully able to use someone else to accomplish those purposes.

Mordecai reminded Esther of God's sovereign purposes. He challenged her to look at what the Lord had done over the last while. He challenged her to ask the questions: Why has God placed me in this palace? Why has He given me this position? Mordecai somehow believed that God had given Esther this place of honour so that she could be His instrument in this hour of need. As much as he loved Esther, Mordecai challenged her to take the risk and go to the king.

Mordecai's words caused Esther to think. She sent word to Mordecai to gather all the Jews of Susa and ask them to fast three days for her. She and her maids would do the same. After three days, she would risk her life and go to the king, even though it was against the law. In verse 16, she resigned herself to the will of God: "if I perish, I perish," she said. Encouraged by this, Mordecai gathered the Jews of Susa together and called them to pray and fast for three days.

God needed to bring Esther to the point where she was willing to risk everything. This is a place where we all need to be in our relationship with God. Are we willing to risk everything to accomplish what God has called us to do? It was relatively easy for Esther when God called her to be queen and live in the lap of luxury. But then God called her to be willing to lay aside all that and risk her life for Him. Would we be ready to go this far for the sake of the Lord and His kingdom?

For Consideration:

- Do bad things happen to good people? What evidence is there here to support your answer?
- Esther may have a false sense of security in this chapter. What false securities can we cling to today?
- What do we learn here about the sovereignty of God in working out the circumstances of life? Is there evidence in your life of how God prepared you for a ministry or challenge? Explain.

- How important is it that we come to the place where we are willing to risk everything for the Lord?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to bring you to the point of laying down everything for Him.
- Thank the Lord that He is a sovereign God who works out His purposes and plans for our lives.
- Ask the Lord to make you willing to follow Him not only in the easy times but also in the difficult times.

29

A BANQUET AND A GALLOWS

Read Esther 5:1-14

The Jews of Susa had fasted and prayed for three days at the invitation of Queen Esther. On the third day, she approached the king to seek his favour and mercy for her people. Though approaching the king without invitation could mean death, Esther willingly took the risk for the sake of her people.

On the third day, Esther dressed in her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his throne facing the entrance when she walked in. This was the moment of truth. Would the king have mercy and extend his sceptre or would he order that she be killed for defying the law of the court?

When the king saw Esther, he was pleased with her. To show his favour, he extended his sceptre. Esther approached and touched the tip of the sceptre. It appears that touching the tip of the sceptre was a means of recognizing, receiving and expressing gratitude for the king's favour and mercy. When the formalities were over, King Xerxes asked Esther what she wanted. He offered her up to half his kingdom. Apparently, he understood that

she would not willingly defy the law of the court without reason.

While Esther could have made her requests known at that time to the king, she chose to ask him to come to a great banquet she was preparing for him. She also invited Haman. King Xerxes, from what we have seen of him in the first part of this book, seemed to enjoy feasting and celebrating. He was quite delighted to accept the invitation and ordered that Haman be brought at once so they could attend the banquet Esther had prepared for them.

It is uncertain why Esther did not immediately ask the king to spare the lives of her people. Maybe she felt she needed to prepare him for this request. Perhaps the timing was not right. It seems to be clear that she did not have the freedom from the Lord to ask him at this time. She waited for the right moment. The right words spoken at the wrong time will not produce the desired result. As representatives of the Lord, we need to know what the Lord would have us to speak. It is just as important, however, for us to wait for the Lord's timing in speaking that word.

As the king drank wine at Esther's banquet, he again asked her what was on her mind and what he could give her. Again, he promises her up to half his kingdom. For the second time, Esther asked him to return the next day with Haman for another banquet. She promised to give him her request at that time.

As Haman left the banquet that evening, he was delighted. As he passed the king's gate, however, he saw Mordecai sitting there. He noticed that Mordecai still

refused to bow down to him. This made him very angry. Verse 10 tells us that he restrained himself and went home. Haman could have done something right then to have Mordecai punished, but God does not permit this to happen. God protected Mordecai on this occasion.

When he returned home that evening, Haman called his friends and family together. He boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and how the king had honoured him above every other noble in the land. He told them of how Esther had invited him alone to the banquet she had prepared for the king and how she had asked him to return the next day. Haman felt important. He saw himself as the most important man in the Persian Empire, next to the king.

Haman then told his friends and wife that all this gave him no satisfaction as long as Mordecai refused to bow to him and recognize his authority and dignity. Mordecai was a thorn in his side. Haman's wife Zeresh and his friends suggested that Haman build a gallows seventy-five feet high (twenty-three meters). The idea was to humiliate Mordecai. Gallows this high would be visible. People would be able to see him hanging from these gallows all over the city. Haman liked the idea but did not have the right to pass the death sentence. He decided, therefore, to ask the king in the morning for permission to have Mordecai hung from these gallows for his refusal to honour and respect him as the king's representative. Haman immediately ordered that the gallows be built, expecting a positive response from the king.

As for Mordecai, problems seemed to be increasing. Time was running out for the Jews. If Haman had his way, Mordecai had only one more day to live. God's timing is not the same as ours. What appeared to be the

end of all hope was the beginning of God's wonderful plan of deliverance.

There are several principles we need to see in this passage. First, notice the hand of God on the lives of His people. We see this in the way God answered the prayers of His people and gave Esther favour in the eyes of the king. We also see His favour on Mordecai as he kept him from Haman's anger at the king's gate. God does answer prayer. On the surface, we see the evil schemes of individuals to destroy the people of God. Behind the scenes, however, the Spirit of God is moving powerfully to bring victory to His people. The outward appearance easily deceives us. God works quietly behind the scenes to accomplish His purpose.

Second, notice the importance of waiting on God's timing. Esther does not immediately bring her request to the king. It was not God's time. Haman needed to build gallows. Those gallows would be proof to the king of his evil intentions. We will also discover in the next chapter that the king himself needed to be prepared for Esther's request. There is a right time for everything. Only when Haman and the king had been adequately prepared by God would Esther be permitted to share her request. Esther needed to be in tune with God's timing.

When he was forty years of age, Moses had a burden for his people (Acts 7:23). He wanted his people to see him as their deliverer (Acts 7:25). While it was the will of God to use Moses to deliver His people, the timing was not right. Moses was not ready to be used. God sent him into the wilderness for forty years. Only when he was eighty years of age did God permit Moses to return to Egypt to deliver His people.

Timing is important. The right word or the right action acted at the wrong time will not accomplish the purpose of God. The Lord may burden us and place a message on our heart, but He also intends for us to wait for His timing. Behind the scenes, God is working to prepare the hearts and lives of those to whom that message is intended. We must be in tune with God in this matter.

For Consideration:

- In this chapter, we see how the enemies of God's people plotted against them. At that same time, however, we see the hand of God at work. What evidence is there that God is at work in the lives of His people in this chapter?
- Take a moment to consider how God is at work in your life today.
- Why is timing important in the ministry of the Kingdom of God?
- Have you ever found yourself so anxious to accomplish the work of God that you did not wait for Him? What was the result?
- How can you know when the timing of God is right? Do you have personal examples of bad timing? What about examples of good timing?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to help you to wait for His timing in your ministry and decisions.
- Thank the Lord that He does answer prayers. Thank Him that He does this despite all the efforts of the enemy to defeat us.
- Thank the Lord that He extends His hand of favour to us, as He did for Esther. Thank Him for the privilege of being a chosen servant in whom He delights.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you failed to trust His purposes and looked more on the outward appearance. Ask Him to give you faith to trust Him even when things don't appear to be going in the direction you had hoped.

30

A REWARD IN ITS PROPER TIME

Read Esther 6:1-14

In the last meditation, we saw how Esther invited the king and Haman to a banquet in their honour. At that banquet, the king asked Esther what he could do for her, but Esther was not prepared to share her request with the king. Instead, she asked him to return to a second banquet she was preparing for him and Haman. At that time, she would give him her answer.

What is essential for us to understand is how God is working behind the scenes to accomplish His purpose. As Esther waited for the right moment to ask the king to save her people, Haman moved forward in his plan to kill Mordecai. The gallows were being prepared to hang Mordecai, but this would ultimately work against Haman.

While Haman was preparing the gallows for Mordecai, God was working in the king's life. That evening, the king could not sleep. He ordered that the book of the chronicles of his reign be brought to him. As he read the account of his reign, the king's attention was drawn to an

incident recorded in the chronicle about Mordecai who had saved his life by exposing an assassination plot. There was no record in the chronicle of any honour or recognition given Mordecai for exposing this plot. The king asked his servants what had been done to recognize Mordecai for his actions. His attendants assured him that Mordecai had never been acknowledged or honoured for his deed.

Again, we see the importance of God's timing in all matters. As the king thought about what needed to do for Mordecai, Haman appeared in the court. He had come at that precise moment to ask the king for permission to hang Mordecai from the gallows he had prepared. The king requested that Haman be brought before him. When Haman approached, the king asked, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?" (verse 6).

Haman could never have imagined that the king was speaking about Mordecai when he asked this question. Haman thought the king was talking about him. Thinking of himself, Haman told the king that he should dress the person he wanted to honour in one of his royal robes and place him on a horse the king had ridden. Haman then suggested that this honoured person should be led through the streets of the city by one of the king's most noble princes proclaiming, "this is what is done for the man the king delights to honour!" (verse 9).

The matter of wearing one of the king's royal robes and riding a horse the king had ridden was a very high honour. In that day even the king's wives could not approach him without special invitation. The king was saying that the person whom he privileged in this way was worthy of great honour.

The king liked Haman's suggestion. He suggested that Haman lead the horse through the city with Mordecai seated on it. We can only imagine how devastating this must have been for Haman. He had come to ask for Mordecai's death, but instead, he was ordered to honour him as no other man had been honoured. To parade Mordecai through the city in this way would have been humiliating for Haman. Added to this was the fact that the gallows were even now being built to hang the man the king wanted to honour. This would not go well for him. It now set Haman against the king because it would be discovered that he wanted to kill the man who had saved the king's life.

After he had paraded Mordecai through the city in this way, Haman returned home filled with grief. He told his wife and friends what had happened that day. His advisers made a fascinating observation. They told him that because Mordecai was of Jewish origin, he could not stand against him. His ruin was sure.

There may be various reasons why Haman's advisers made this statement. It may have been because they had heard about the God of the Jews. He was a powerful God who fought for His people. Haman was setting himself up against the God of the Jews and, therefore, he could not possibly succeed. Beyond this, however, was the fact that Mordecai had just been honoured above Haman. Mordecai had achieved a very powerful position in the land. As a Jew, he would not sit by and watch Haman destroy his people. Haman's plot to kill the Jews would be exposed, and he would be seen as a traitor to the king.

Haman was still speaking to his advisors about this matter when the king's eunuchs came to escort him to

the banquet Esther had prepared. When he went this time, however, Haman was not quite so proud. There would have been fear in his heart. Overnight his position before the king had changed. The proud boasts of Haman are stopped in an instant.

God works in his time. As Esther delayed, God worked. Soon the time would be perfect for her to ask the king to save her people from the hands of Haman. Two days before, the response of the king would have been very different. Now, his heart was prepared to give Esther her request.

Many times, we do not see what God is doing. In an instant, everything can change. The answer to the problem the Jews were experiencing came overnight. One moment they were in despair; the next moment they were rejoicing in victory.

For Consideration:

- Why is timing so crucial in the work of the kingdom of God?
- What is God doing behind the scenes in this passage? Could it be that God is working out the solution to the problem you are facing today?
- Are you facing a trial that seems to be overwhelming right now? What does this passage tell us about how close that victory could be?

- What evidence is there that the time was right for Esther to share her request?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is a God who answers prayer.
- Ask that Lord to forgive you for the times you have doubted His provision and purpose.
- Thank the Lord that He is always working for our good. Praise Him that He has already heard your request and is even now working on the solution.
- Ask God to help you to know how to wait on Him and His timing.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have stepped out too quickly and taken matters into your own hands.

31

A REVERSAL OF HAMAN'S PLOT

Read Esther 7:1-8:17

This was the second banquet Esther had prepared for the king and Haman. Haman came to this second banquet, however, with a heavy heart. The king had just honoured Mordecai whom Haman had intended to hang.

As the king and Haman dined with Esther, things would get worse for Haman. Unknown to him, Esther and Mordecai were related. Also, Haman did not know that Esther was a Jew. As they were drinking wine that day, the king asked Esther for the third time:

"Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." (Esther 7:2)

This time, Esther would give the king her answer. Everything had been prepared. To the shock of the king that evening, Esther asked him to save her life and to spare her people. She told the king that she and her people had been sold to destruction, slaughter and annihilation. She

told him that if they had merely been sold as slaves, she would not have bothered him but she could not bear to see the extermination of her people.

We can only imagine the response of Haman as he sat there at that banquet table. Fear and terror would have overcome him. He had not known that Esther was of Jewish nationality. What she was telling the king struck dread in Haman's heart.

King Xerxes was very obviously disturbed by this request. He asked Esther who would dare to do such a thing. Esther pointed to Haman. Haman was speechless. His heart was filled with terror as he looked at the king.

The king left the banquet in a rage and went out into the palace garden. At that point, King Xerxes would likely have felt betrayed. Haman had been his trusted servant. He had lifted him up beyond all other servants in the land. He had trusted him implicitly. When he had come to ask permission to deal with a people whom he said were in opposition to the king's reign, Xerxes had trusted him. Very likely, as he walked in his garden, the king considered his options.

When the king left the banquet, Haman stayed behind with Esther. He knew that his life was in danger. Esther was reclining on a couch in the banquet hall. Just as the king returned from the garden, he saw Haman falling on the couch where Esther reclined, possibly to beg for mercy. The king was not pleased. He accused him of molesting the queen. Servants immediately covered Haman's face. The covering of Haman's face was typical of what would happen to the condemned criminal. It was a symbolic way of saying that the individual was no

longer worthy to look on the face of the king. The covering of Haman's face was his sentence of death.

It was one of the king's eunuchs, a man by the name of Harborne, who told the king that Haman had ordered the construction of the seventy-five-foot gallows to hang Mordecai. This was an even greater insult to the king. Just that day the king had honoured Mordecai for saving his life. Haman had been planning to hang the man who had saved the king.

The king ordered that Haman be hung on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. The enemy of God's people was defeated, but there was still much to do to save the lives of the Jews. Haman's order had already gone out, and it could not be changed. God's people were still in grave danger of annihilation.

That very same day, King Xerxes gave Queen Esther Haman's estate. This estate would have been worth a considerable fortune, as Haman was the highest ranking official in the kingdom.

Esther told the king that she was related to Mordecai. When the king heard this, he commanded that Mordecai be brought into his presence. That day the king took off his signet ring, the symbol of his authority, and gave it to Mordecai. Esther appointed him to oversee Haman's estate. Everything that belonged to Haman was given to Esther and Haman. God took Haman's life and wealth and gave it to His people. God had spoiled the enemy's plan and stripped him of his power.

That day, Esther pleaded with the king to put an end to the evil plot of Haman. King Xerxes listened to Esther

and extended his gold sceptre to her as a sign of his favour. Esther asked the king to write and order overruling the command of Haman. The king could not do this because Haman's decree was official. It had been stamped with the king's signet ring and could not be changed even by the king himself. King Xerxes did, however, gave Esther and Mordecai permission to write a different decree—this one on behalf of the Jews. The king told them to write it as it seemed best to them and to seal it with the king's signet ring making it official and irrevocable (verse 8). The challenge was for Esther and Mordecai to write a decree that would protect the Jews but not change what Haman had decreed.

In verse 9, the royal secretaries were summoned. A decree was drafted for the governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia. This decree was translated in the languages of all the provinces so all could understand. It was written in the name of King Xerxes and sealed with his signet ring. Couriers were sent on fast horses to each of the provinces to bring the king's decree to the governors and nobles.

The decree granted the Jews in every city the right to defend themselves. They could destroy, kill or annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them, their women or their children. They were also given the right to plunder the property of their enemies. This decree was issued as law in every province. Mordecai's wisdom is seen in this decree. Knowing that he could not change the order of Haman, Mordecai discouraged the enemies of God's people from attacking.

Mordecai left the presence of the king dressed in royal robes and a large gold crown. The city of Susa celebrated his promotion. Especially for the Jews, this was a day

of great joy feasting and praise. God had been faithful. Haman's evil plot had been reversed.

What is of great interest to us here is that verse 17 tells us that many people from the various provinces became Jews because the fear of God had seized them. God strengthened His people and added to their number.

Earlier, Mordecai had given Esther to God and His will for her life. Mordecai had given her to be the wife of the king, and this was not without personal sacrifice. During that time, he was not able to see Esther. God blessed Esther and Mordecai and brought them back together. Mordecai waited patiently and obediently, and God blessed his faith. Mordecai and Esther now served the Lord together. God does reward faithful sacrifice.

What a blessing it is to know that no weapon forged against us will prevail (Isaiah 54:17). God will strip our enemies of their sword. God is the protector of His people. There were many times when Israel did not understand the purpose and plan of God. Their enemies seemed to prevail, but God would not let His people be destroyed. He cared too much for them. He is the same God today. He cares for us and will protect us. As we wait for the Lord and trust in Him, we too will see this same victory in His time.

For Consideration:

- Once again, we see the importance of the Lord's timing in this passage. How is this timing evident in this section?
- What weapons has the enemy been using against you? What encouragement do you receive from this passage?
- What do we learn here about how God rewards those who are faithful to Him?
- What struggle are you facing today? What are the promises of God for you here?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is your protector.
- Ask the Lord to help you to live like Esther and Mordecai in absolute obedience to His Word, purpose and timing.
- Thank the Lord that He can turn the enemy's sword against him.
- Take a moment to consider the way the Lord has guided and blessed you. Thank Him for those blessings.

PURIM:**A CELEBRATION OF VICTORY**

Read Esther 9:1-10:3

Things had radically changed for the people of God. In just a short while, the Lord had turned the tables on Haman. A decree had gone out in the land that the people of God were to take up arms to defend themselves against any enemy that might attack them.

On the day of the attack, the Jews assembled in all the provinces of King Xerxes to defend themselves. God gave the Jews victory that day. When their enemies came to fight, the Jews defeated them. Even the nobles, governors and satraps of the various provinces chose to side with the Jews because they feared Mordecai who had become very important in the land. He held a prominent position at the palace, and his reputation quickly spread throughout the empire.

Verse 5 tells us that the Jews struck down their enemies with the sword. In the citadel of Susa alone, the Jews killed five hundred men. Among them were ten sons of

Haman. Though they were permitted by law to plunder their enemies, the Jews refused to do so.

When the king heard how many men were slain in Susa that day, he was concerned. He questioned Esther about what had happened in the rest of his kingdom. Though the numbers concerned him, Esther still found favour in his eyes. Despite the loss of lives that day, the king still gave Esther full permission to carry out her plan. When Esther asked permission for the Jews to carry out the edict for one more day as well as permission to hang the ten sons of Haman on the gallows, the king readily agreed. Esther and Mordecai were intent on wiping out their enemies.

In all of this, we see the tremendous favour of the Lord on the Jews. From that point on there could be no doubt in the mind of the citizens of the Persian Empire that King Xerxes was protecting the Jews and saw them as his friends. With Queen Esther being of Jewish nationality and Mordecai in such a high position in government, people would have hesitated before speaking out against the Jews.

The next day, as the king had commanded, the Jews in Susa gathered again and put to death another 300 men, for a total of eight hundred dead in Susa. In other provinces, another seventy-five thousand enemies lay dead at the hands of the Jews. On the fourteenth day of the month, the Jews of the provinces celebrated their victory. In Susa, because they were permitted to fight one more day, they celebrated their success on the fifteenth of the month.

Mordecai recorded these events and wrote letters to the Jews in various provinces to have them remember the

fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar each year. Every year they were to celebrate this victory over the enemy. The Jews were to celebrate the day by feasting, joyous celebration and by giving gifts to one another and the poor.

The celebration is known as Purim. The name comes from the word "pur." In Esther 3:7 Haman decided when he would carry out his evil plot by casting the "pur." To cast the "pur" meant to cast lots. The lot may have been some form of dice that were cast to determine the will of the gods. Purim is the celebration of how the Lord overruled the decision made by the "pur." The Jews of Esther's day passed down this yearly celebration to their descendants to remember what the Lord God had done for His people.

God rewarded Xerxes for the favour he showed the Jews. He grew in wealth and power. Mordecai also increased in power in the land. The record of his service in Persia was written in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia. He was held in high regard by the Jews for his work on their behalf.

In the end, the Lord God overcame the enemies of His people. While God's people were in exile because of their sin, God still took care of them. There were times when God's people questioned His ways and purposes. There were times when the Jews could neither understand what God was doing nor could they see His purpose. God had not abandoned them in their hour of need.

I find it tremendously encouraging that all this took place as God was punishing God's people for their rebellion against Him. It was in the land of exile that the Lord met

them in such a powerful way. This encourages me because I see that God will keep me even when I fall short of His standard. He loves me even when I sin. He will not abandon me because I have not perfectly served Him. I often fall short, but God will always be faithful. How thankful we need to be.

God will never change. What he did for His people in the days of Esther, He will do for us today. He raises up those who seem insignificant and makes them people of tremendous influence. He reaches out to a less than perfect people and blesses them. As Esther and Mordecai stepped out in obedience and faithfulness, God opened doors of opportunity and deliverance. I believe we can trust him to do the same for us today.

For Consideration:

- What is Purim? How was it celebrated?
- What victories has the Lord God given you in your life? How have you demonstrated your gratitude to God for these victories?
- Have you ever found yourself questioning the purposes and plans of God for your life? Have things in your life ever become overwhelming? What does this chapter teach us about God and the victory He offers?
- How vital was the favour of God on the life of Esther and Mordecai? Is the favour of God on His children today? How might we experience God's favour?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the victories He has given you in your life.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not trusted Him and His purpose.
- Thank the Lord for the way He goes before us to open doors.
- Ask God to enable you to know His purpose and plan for your life. Ask Him for strength and enablement to step out in that purpose.

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