

Building the People of God

NEHEMIAH



All Saints Homegroup series

September – December 2018

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INTRODUCTION to NEHEMIAH

Historical background

The people of Judah were conquered by the Babylonians in 587 BC and deported to Babylon. This was God's judgment for persistent idolatry and disobedience. However, God was not finished with them. He was at work to bring them back to the land promised to them – to rebuild their lives and faith.

Nehemiah is the last historical Old Testament book before the time of Jesus. Malachi was the prophet during this period.

Structure

The book tells the story of the return of God's chosen people to Israel to rebuild the temple and the city. The first half (chs 1-7) is devoted almost entirely to Nehemiah's work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

The second half of the book (chs 8-13), presents the work of both Ezra and Nehemiah as they seek to bring about spiritual renewal of the community, including the repair of the peoples' morals.

Relevance

Though describing what happened at a particular time in the history of Israel, the book of Nehemiah has much to teach us about -

- God's faithfulness to His people despite their spiritual fickleness.
- What it means to have faith in God's promises & a passion for scripture.
- What it means to belong to God's people, and to work together for His glory
- How to face enemy attacks
- How to pray & to know that God is in control
- How to exercise godly leadership

1. Prayer & Preparation

chapters 1 & 2

Consider : What preparations might you make as you think about starting a project ? [Perhaps a sewing project? landscaping your garden? redecorating a room? planning a holiday? de-cluttering your home? a menu for a special occasion?....]

The book of Nehemiah records the sense of crisis which, in 445 BC, provoked both Nehemiah and God's people in Jerusalem to assess what really mattered to them both personally and communally, and then to embark on the greatest project of their lives.

The book opens with Nehemiah living and working in a foreign land, 700 miles away from home. Artaxerxes is on the throne of Persia, and Nehemiah is serving him in Susa (site of the king's winter palace) as a top civil servant. From here, Nehemiah hears distressing news concerning his homeland which sets in motion the events recorded in this book.

Read chapter 1

Notes :

1:1 **Kislev** - the month of November/December in the Hebrew lunar calendar. Probably in 446 BC when checked against surviving Persian records.

twentieth year - of the reign of King Artaxerxes

1:11 **cupbearer** - a position of responsibility as one of the top officials in Susa, which included choosing and tasting the king's wine to ensure it wasn't poisoned. It indicates a role as the king's protector and confidante.

1. How did Nehemiah react to the news he received from Hanani?
(vs 1-4)

2. Look at Nehemiah's prayer in verses 5-11. What does he understand about God's nature and character?

3. What impressions of Nehemiah do you get from his actions and his prayer?

Read chapter 2

4. It is now the month of Nisan (April/May). Four months had passed between Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1 and his opportunity to bring his request before the king in this chapter. How do his replies to the king reveal what he has been thinking and praying about during this time? (vs 4-8)

5. What evidence of Nehemiah's wisdom and thoroughness do you find in verses 11-15?

6. How does Nehemiah communicate his vision of rebuilding to the people? (vs 17-20)

7. Why was Nehemiah so confident of success? (v 8b,12,18,20)

<p>Notice in passing the reaction of Sanballat and Tobiah in 2:10,19. We will look more closely at these men in the next study.</p>

How is this relevant to us today?

Choose one, or more, of the following questions, to discuss and apply.

8. The actions in these 2 chapters flow out of Nehemiah's realization that God was being dishonoured by Jerusalem being in ruins. He saw the main issue as God's reputation, rather than the peoples' security.
- In the events recorded, what was Nehemiah's part, and what was God's part ?
 - What lessons does this have for us, as **we** seek to discover, and to build, God's kingdom?
9. Think about a challenging situation (in your own life, in the lives of your friends, or in your church's life) where serious help and "repairs" are needed.
- How have you previously responded?
 - How does the example of Nehemiah show you a better way to respond?
10. Consider Nehemiah's example of prayerful waiting**, careful planning, clear testimony, and energetic purposefulness. Which of these qualities do you most need as you serve God, and why?

** Nehemiah had 4 months of determining what might be God's will, of assessing when to act. This is often the path God calls us to walk. Too often we imagine that prayer will provide us with a quick-fix solution. The waiting time is when God can make us what he wants us to be, as we begin to think God's thoughts after him and to desire the things He desires. This is the *context* of the arrow prayer of 2:4, "Then I prayed to the God of heaven and answered the king". (Jonathan Lamb, Faith in the Face of Danger. p22-3)

Remember One Thing [R.O.T.] :-

Reflect on all that you have studied and discussed. Write down one verse, or lesson, that you want to remember from this.

In conclusion

Nehemiah served God where he had been put - in Susa, as a member of a minority group, & under a pagan ruler. Yet he also had a responsive heart to hear and respond to God's call, and to take up the challenge of God's work when it came.

Nehemiah's confidence came from his understanding of God's promises and purposes, which he knew from scripture. He knew God to be 'great and awesome', and so when faced with a conflict of authorities (the 'God of heaven' versus the king of Persia, or versus the governors of the regions) Nehemiah was able to trust in God's promises and believe in His power to change circumstances.

Nehemiah was also able to see past the ruins of the walls; to see the situation as God saw it and to know that God was behind the project to rebuild. **This is the fundamental perspective we need in our own service for the Lord – that it is God's work.** Therefore, Nehemiah was able to trust in God's timing and control, remembering both His greatness ("the God of heaven" – 2:20) and his closeness ("the gracious hand...upon me"- 2:8,18)

2. The Builders & their Opponents chapters 3 & 4

Nehemiah chapter 3 describes the work of rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem, as a pre-requisite to rebuilding the identity of God's people. Chapter 4 then reveals the opposition and difficulties that arose as this project got under way.

A. In Chapter 3 various groups of people in and around the city got involved in the task of rebuilding. To get a better idea of how this might have felt, we are going to creatively re-write this chapter - filling in the blank spaces with individuals and groups who are part of our church community. Some have been filled in to get you started.

Work together to fill in the rest of the blanks with church people you know – and remember to insert yourself and your group members!

John Kirkland and his fellow leaders started to rebuild at the Sheep Gate.

They dedicated it and set up its doors, building the wall as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and the Tower of Hananel.

² People from Hamilton Street worked next to them, and beyond them was Paul son of Barnfather. ³ The fish gate was built by the sons of Wilkin[son] They did the whole thing - laid the beams, hung the doors and put the bolts and bars in place. ⁴ Caleb son of Paul and grandson of

Tin[son] repaired the next section of the wall. Beside him were Rob and then Rachel. ⁵ Next were the people from Newton though their leaders refused to help.

⁶ The Old City Gate was repaired by Ken, son of Wood and Ian, son of Speechley. They laid the beams, set up the doors, and installed the bolts and bars. ⁷ Next to them were those from Blacon and Westminster Park and people from Curzon Park and Handbridge the headquarters of the governor of the province west of the Dee river.

⁸ Next was *Helen* a goldsmith by trade, who also worked on the wall. Beyond was *Yvonne* a manufacturer of perfumes. They restored a section of Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. ⁹ *Sam*, the leader of *the Groves missional community*, was next to them on the wall. ¹⁰ Next *Stephen* repaired the wall beside his own house, and next to him was *Christina*. ¹¹ Then came *Andy* and *Paula* who repaired the Tower of the Ovens, in addition to another section of the wall. ¹² *Tim* and his daughters repaired the next section. He was the leader of *the Pilchers*. ¹³ The people of *Upton*, led by *Andy* rebuilt the valley gate, hung its doors, and installed the bolts and bars. They also repaired the fifteen hundred feet of wall to the Dung gate.

¹⁴ The Dung Gate was repaired by *Paul & John*, of *the Garden Gate community* After rebuilding it, they hung the doors and installed the bolts and bars. ¹⁵ *Simon* leader of *Vicars Cross* repaired the Fountain gate. He rebuilt it, roofed it, hung its doors and installed its bolts and bars. Then he repaired the wall of the pool of Siloam near the King's garden, and he rebuilt the wall as far as the stairs that descend from the City of David ¹⁶ Next to him was *Alex* leader of *Hoole*. He rebuilt the wall to a place opposite the royal cemetery as far as the water reservoir and the House of the Warriors. ¹⁷ Next was a group of *youths* working under the supervision of *Missy*. Then came *Tabitha* leader of *Sunday Club* who supervised the building of the wall on behalf of (her) own district. ¹⁸ Next down the line were (her) countryfolk, led by *Peri* the leader of *B-it*. ¹⁹ Next to them, _____ repaired another section of the wall the armoury of the buttress. Next was _____ who repaired an additional section from the buttress to the door of the home of _____ . ²¹ _____ rebuilt another section of the wall extending from a point opposite the door of _____'s house to the side of the house.

²² Then came the *Senior Residents* from the surrounding region. After them _____, _____ and _____ repaired the sections next to their own houses. ²⁴Next was _____ who rebuilt another section of the wall from _____'s house to the buttress and the corner. ²⁵ _____ carried on the work from a point opposite the buttress and the corner to the upper tower that projects from the king's house beside the court of the guard. Next to him were _____ and _____ living on the hill of Ophel, who repaired the wall as far as the Water Gate. ²⁷ Then came the people of *Newton* who repaired another section opposite the great projecting tower and over to the wall of Ophel. The _____ repaired the wall up the hill from the Horse Gate, each one doing the section immediately opposite (their) own house. Next, _____ also rebuilt the wall next to their own house, and beyond that was *Steve Tynegate*, the gatekeeper of the East Gate. ³⁰ Next _____ and _____ repaired another section, while _____ rebuilt the wall next to their own house. _____, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the wall as far as the housing for the *residents of Eaton Lodge* opposite the Inspection Gate. Then he continued as far as the upper room at the corner. ³² The other goldsmiths and merchants repaired the wall from that corner to the Sheep Gate.

1. In this chapter, the men of Tekoa built more than one section (vs 5 & 27); some worked near their houses (vs 23, 28-30) and one man even mobilized his daughters (v12).
 - In your involvement at church, whether in a big or small way, do you see what you do as being part of a bigger 'building' project for God? Why, or why not?
 - Is there someone you 'build' alongside at church who is very different from you in various ways? How is this a both a blessing and a challenge?

2. What was the one jarring note in this chapter?

What is your response when, while you toil in a ministry, it *appears* that others don't join in to help?

B. Read chapter 4

Notes

4:1 Sanballat - governor of Samaria, to **the north** of Jerusalem.

4:3 Tobiah - governor of Ammon in **the east**, and a member of an influential Jewish family.

4:7 the Arabs - Judah's neighbor to **the south** (led by Geshem, see 2:19.)

the Ashdodites - who were in **the west**.

3. Although the unity and effectiveness of the wall builders was impressive, others were opposed to the project. What tactics did Sanballat and Tobiah use to try and stop the rebuilding? (vs 1-3, 7-8,11)

4. In addition to these external threats, what problems did the builders face? (vs 10,12)

5. What practical precautions did Nehemiah and the people take? (vs 13-23)

6. As he faced all these pressures, what truths about God did Nehemiah hold on to? (v.4-6, 14-15, 20)
7. What can we learn from Nehemiah about how to deal both prayerfully **and** practically with opponents?

Nehemiah in his prayer (vs 4-6) asked for vindication because the enemies despised and ridiculed the work which was being done in the name of God. Their opposition to the work was their opposition to God. Nehemiah's concern is for God's honour and he appeals to Him to demonstrate His authority. (F C Fensham, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, p181)

How is this relevant to us today?

Choose one, or more, of the following questions, to discuss and apply

8. What work of God needs building near you? Explore possible ways in which you can serve God in your church community – and begin to 'build' alongside others, either
- (i) as an individual (in your home, or profession)
 - (ii) as a family (involving your children)
 - (iii) as a small group
9. Discouragement came to God's people when they were half-way through the project (compare 4:6 and 4:10). Sometimes discouragement is one of the greatest weapons of the enemy.
- When, and how, does discouragement or negativity enter your life?

- In areas of your life where you are facing discouragement, how can you respond as Nehemiah did?
- Do you know someone who is facing opposition and/or is discouraged? How can you encourage them to keep going, just as Nehemiah did?

10. “Anyone seeking to fulfill God’s purposes, to run the race to which he has called them, will find themselves confronting one hurdle after another. Difficulties are not a punishment, they are an affirmation and they are to be expected.”

- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
- Pray for God’s protection over Christian ministries you know (& their leaders) that may come under attack from opposition.

Remember One Thing [R.O.T.] :-

Reflect on all that you have studied and discussed. Write down one verse, or lesson, that you want to remember from this.

In conclusion

The account in chapter 3 shows that 40 sections of the wall were worked on by people from different families, different towns, different trades and professions. God’s people were motivated to work together with a remarkable unity and sense of purpose.

Unsurprisingly, partway through the project, opposition to this work of God emerged. As a result, the initial enthusiasm of the builders was wearing thin, and the task seemed too hard to complete. Nehemiah knew the only way to keep going was to remember God - His justice (4-5), protection (v9), power (14-15), and commitment to them (v20).

These are truths that we also need to remember today.

3. More Internal Troubles and External Threats

Nehemiah 5&6

Previously, we saw how God's people experienced both progress and problems as they sought to rebuild the city walls. There is a similar pattern in these chapters. Chapter 5 describes internal problems which threatened the community's progress, and in chapter 6 there are a series of external attacks from those who are determined to stop the successful completion of the rebuilding project.

Read Chapter 5: Internal troubles

Notes

5:7 **usury** = to charge interest. Lending money and charging interest was legal, but what was not allowed under Jewish law was to make a profit out of a fellow Jew's poverty and distress. According to the law (Exo 22:25; Lev 25:35-43; Deut 15:7-8; 23:19)

5:13 **shaking out the folds** – people kept personal belongings and money in a pocket in the folds of their outer garments. By shaking out the folds to show he had nothing left, Nehemiah was making a visual point to all who ignored his call to help the poor that they would themselves lose all their property and possessions.

1. What was the cause of this 'great outcry' in verses 1-5?
2. Note down all of Nehemiah's reactions and responses to the abuses that had been going on (v6-9)

3. How did Nehemiah challenge the nobles and officials to repent and to make restitution; and with what results? (vs 9-13)

4. In verses 1-13, Nehemiah had set about putting the house of Israel in order, through removing corruption and oppression from the people. In verses 14-19, he reports on his own conduct as governor of Judah.

- what does he say about his motives and his actions?
- what kind of leader was he?

Read Chapter 6: External threats

Notes

6:2 **the plain of Ono** was halfway between Samaria and Jerusalem, in hostile territory. It would have taken a whole day to get there.

6:10-13 **commit a sin** : Nehemiah was being invited to go into the area of the temple where only a priest could go. As a layman, to enter, even as a victim seeking asylum, was to misuse God's house and violate His laws. (See Numbers 18:22)

6:17-19 **Tobiah** : There were influential families in Jerusalem with divided loyalties. They kept in touch with Tobiah as he had married Shecaniah's daughter. In addition, Tobiah's son was married to Meshullam's daughter. Meshullam was, at the same time, helping to build the wall (3:4,30)

5. Nehemiah's opponents used various tactics against him in their attempts to stop the rebuilding of the city wall. Look at what these were, and write down how Nehemiah responded to each one in the following chart:-

Enemy tactic	Nehemiah's insight & response
1. Distraction (vs2, 4), & diversion	vs 2b-4
2. Slander (vs 5-7)	vs 8-9
3. Temptation to compromise (vs 10-13)	vs 11-14

6. What principles are there here to help us avoid being side-tracked from our calling to build up God's people and God's church?

7. What was the result when the wall was completed on the 25th of Ellul (October of 445 BC) ?

How is this relevant to us today?

Choose one, or more, of the following questions, to discuss and apply

8. The people in Nehemiah's day were challenged to 'walk their talk' as a covenant people of God, and especially in their relationships with one another (chapter 5).

All of us can be tempted to fall into the same sins as the nobles and officials, and take advantage of other believers.

- Describe different ways this ‘taking advantage of others’ could happen today, however subtly.
- What changes, however small, can we make in order to better portray a community of generosity, unselfishness and equality?
- Who are the equivalent of Jerusalem’s “powerless” (v5) in our [global] Christian community?

9. Nehemiah was not swayed from his service to God despite the plots of his enemies:

- he did not let himself be distracted or manipulated (6:1-4)
- he was able to handle unjust accusations (6:5-9)
- he avoided compromising his faith (6:10-14)
- Which of these would be most likely to cause you to give up?
- What can you learn from Nehemiah to help you to stand firm?

10. We have heard it said that ‘friendly fire hurts the most’. Chapter 6:12-14, 17-19 describes how Nehemiah had to face insidious enemies from within the community. What can you learn from Nehemiah’s handling of this problem? (How does this help you in the circumstances you face, where the ‘opponent’ turns out to be someone you assumed would be supportive?)

11. Consider the ways in which prayer has undergirded everything Nehemiah has done in these first 6 chapters of the book. What do you need to learn from him about prayer?

Pray for the Lord’s protection (for yourself, your small group, your leaders and your church) as together you seek to build God’s kingdom.

12. “The forms of attack on Christian disciples come in various shapes and sizes, some direct and hostile and some subtle and persuasive.”(J Lamb 82)

- Share with a good friend the kind of pressures you face in your Christian life, and pray together for the Lord’s protection.
- Leaders are also vulnerable: pray for those with pastoral and leadership responsibility in your church.

Remember One Thing [R.O.T.] :-

Reflect on all that you have studied and discussed. Write down one verse, or lesson, that you want to remember from this.

In Conclusion

Nehemiah’s primary concern was for God’s honour. He knew that the way the Israelites lived would send a message to all the people around them. They were meant to be a distinctive community, marked by God’s justice, compassion and love. The actions of the nobles were falling short of God’s standards and he took it very seriously. Nehemiah himself practised what he preached – as a leader , he had integrity and generosity. His concern was what God thought about his conduct (5:19). His obedience kept him close to God, and enabled him to see through all the schemes of his enemies.

4. Responding to God's Word

chapters 8-9

The Israelites have rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and set the gates in place. In **chapter 7**, steps are taken to ensure that the city is kept safe by appointing godly people to guard it, and the chapter finishes with a strong sense that Israel has come home : the city's defenses are completed and the inhabitants assembled.

From **chapter 8** onwards, attention turns to re-building the spiritual lives of God's people under the shared leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. [Ezra is the religious leader whom Nehemiah (the civic leader) brought in to take the lead in the realm of law and covenant.]

Read chapter 7 :73b – 8:18

Notes

7:73b-8:1 **the seventh month** was one of great importance to the Jews.

It included several feasts – the Feast of Trumpets on the first day of the 7th month (vs 1-12; Lev 23:23-25); the Day of Atonement (which is not mentioned in this book); and the 7-day Feast of Tabernacles (vs 13-18; Lev 23:39-43).

So, a few days after the rebuilding project is completed, the people gather for a New Year celebration on the first day of this month.

8:4 The thirteen men helping Ezra may well have been priests.

1. Imagine yourself in the scene described in verses 1-9. Who do you see? What do you hear? How do you feel?

2. In what ways did the people respond when they heard the Word of the Lord?

3. What was the role of the leaders (Ezra, Nehemiah, & the Levites) ?
(vs 1-12)
(In vs 9-12, why do you think they urge the people to celebrate?)

In these verses God's people accepted the authority of the law of the Lord. The rest of the chapter (8:13 – 18) describes how they then put its commands into practice.

Read chapter 9:1-5a

4. What effect has all the Scripture reading over about 3 weeks (it is now the 24th day of the 7th month) had on the Israelites? (How do they show how serious they are about their sin?)

Notes

- 9:1 **sackcloth** : This was normally made from goat's hair which was black. The harshness of the cloth next to the skin made it an effective aid to mourning, suffering and repentance.
- 9:2 **foreigners**: This was a call to separation from the **religious influence** of the pagan people around them, and implied a spirit of dedication to the Lord as in Lev 20:26, "I... have separated you from the peoples that you should be mine."

Read chapter 9: 5b -37 As they pray and praise God, the people recall and declare what He has done for them as a people and a nation. [*One way to explore this section would be to print out a copy of the text for each group member – to allow them underline or circle their answers to Qs 5 and 7)*

5. List below all the things that God has done, and which reveal His character. (Look for the verbs : *you chose, you led, you gave, etc*)

6. Which of these aspects of God mean the most to you at this juncture of your life? Why?

7. Now list the actions and the attitudes of the people (vs 16-17,26,28-30,35-35). How do these 2 lists compare?

How is this relevant to us today?

Choose one, or more, of the following questions, to discuss and apply.

8. What specific lessons from this prayer and declaration of faith (9:5-37) will you take to heart for your own life?

9. There was power for renewal when the Israelites put a priority on God's Word, repented of their sins, responded in obedience, and praised Him.

- Which of these needs most attention in your life?
- What steps will you take to change?

“In God there is joy, giving strength.
Without God, there is misery leading to weakness and apathy”
(Dave Cave, Ezra & Nehemiah, p147)

Remember One Thing [R.O.T.] :-

Reflect on all that you have studied and discussed. Write down one verse, or lesson, that you want to remember from this.

In conclusion

The reading of scripture (chapter 8) is followed by confession of sin (chapter 9). When the people weep under conviction of their sin, Ezra & Nehemiah point them to the wider context of God’s purposes for his people, and urge them to accept with joy all that God has done for them. (8:9-10, 17-18)

The divine authority of the Word of God is emphasized throughout. Notice also how it was read in the city centre, “the square at the Water gate” (8:3) and not in a religious building.

The people hear God’s word, celebrate God’s goodness, know God’s grace and then obey God’s laws. This is the pattern that we also should follow.

5. Renewing God's covenant

chapters 10 -12

For the Israelites, to be God's community would mean much more than simply having a physical wall that set them apart. It meant having a vital relationship with the LORD. The people recognized the need to renew their covenant with the LORD (chapter 10). They were to live by God's standards and thus to witness to the character of the God they worshipped. In the special agreement made by the people – the renewal of the covenant relationship – they affirm their distinctiveness & made a number of specific resolutions to be faithful.

Read chapter 9:38 and 10:28-39 (skim read 10:1-27)

Notes

10:29 **oath...curse** : The ceremony of taking an oath was an integral part of making a covenant. The minor partner(s) had to take an oath to keep the stipulations of the covenant. The curse is closely connected to this because when the oath is broken, the curse will come into effect.

10:38 **tithe of the tithes** : this refers to Numbers 18:26, which shows that the Levites, as recipients of the tithes of all Israel, had to tithe what they received, and pass on this tenth share to the priests.

1. Notice that it was the leaders, Levites and priests who took the lead as signatories of the covenant. (9:38, 10:1,14)

- What impact would this have had on the rest of the people?
- Do leaders who “walk the talk” have a greater impact? Why?

2. What was the responsibility of the rest of the community? (vs.28-29)

3. The renewal of the covenant marked a renewed commitment to keep God's law (10:28-29) and to live by His standards. The people also promised to be faithful to God in specific areas of life.

Discuss what actions would be our equivalent of what the Israelites promised, and why each of these is important :-

Areas needing action	Principle being emphasized	Expressions of this principle today
No marriage outside the people of God (v30)	Maintain their identity as God's people - true spiritual loyalty and faithfulness to God & to live by God's standards	
keeping the Sabbath (v31)	A day set aside to reflect on God's goodness and worship Him. Dependence on God to fully care for them and provide for their needs (even when they were not working)	
annual offerings in money, and in kind, to the temple (v32-39)	Recognition of their individual responsibility to give, to sustain the ministry of the temple	

4. "The house of our God" is a phrase used 9 times in this passage, and it ends with the final pledge, "We will not neglect the house of our God."(10:39) What does this reveal about the attitude of the people?

Summary : Life in God's city (chapters 11 & 12)

After rebuilding the city walls, Nehemiah went on to a plan to populate Jerusalem which was still largely uninhabited.

Chapter 11 contains a list of the people who went to live in the city (vs:3-24) so that there would be a balanced and strong community within the walls, and where the worship of God was a central element. The rest of the people stayed in their ancestral/family homes (v20).

Chapter 12 lists the priests and Levites who had returned to serve in Jerusalem (vs 1-26) and who play an important part in the dedication of the completed city wall (v27ff). This celebration acknowledged that God, in His power, had brought His good work to completion.

Read chapter 11:1-4a (skim read 4b-36)

Note

11:1 **cast lots** : In their culture this was one method of discovering God's will : "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Prov 16:33)

5. How could moving to live in Jerusalem have been regarded as
- (a) a privilege?
 - (b) a sacrifice?

Read chapter 12: 27 – 43

6. Imagine yourself in the crowd at this dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, observing what happens. (Perhaps try acting this out this scene.)

- What seems to be the main emotion?
- What (and who) do the festivities focus on?

7. Behind the scenes, something else has been occurring. What do the people contribute towards, and why? (12:44-47)

How is this relevant to us today?

Choose one, or more, of the following questions, to discuss and apply

8. Do some further thinking about the principles lying behind each of the commitments in 10:30-39. How would applying these affect our lives
- (i) as individuals?
 - (ii) as a church community?

[Note that the peoples' response to God was specific and practical. James tells us that we ought to be 'doers of the word' and not just hearers. Can you share any specific area in your life where God is challenging you to live according to His standards?]

9. Read the quote in the box below, and in the light of this, consider: How do **you** choose where to live and work?

"The first thing which strikes us about Nehemiah's unadorned account of this repopulation (of 'the holy city') is the people's total subservience to God's will. In order to determine who was to make the sacrifice, the people cast lots to determine whether they were among the *one out of every ten* destined to live in Jerusalem. About 5000 of these contemporaries of Nehemiah were prepared to subject themselves and their whole future to the unfolding of God's sovereign will for their lives. What they preferred was secondary to what God desired. Discovering God's mind about their future took priority over every other consideration. It is not always easy for us to discern the will of God, though he is more eager to reveal it than we are to discover it."

(R Brown, p196)

10. Rebuilding the wall helped the Jewish people rebuild their identity as God's people. But that was only the beginning. Their ongoing responsibility was to take care of God's house.

What does 'not neglecting the house of our God' (10:39b) mean, and include, for you?

Remember One Thing [R.O.T.] :-

Reflect on all that you have studied and discussed. Write down one verse, or lesson, that you want to remember from this.

In conclusion

In these chapters, Jerusalem is re-populated and the people commit themselves to follow God's ways. In chapter 12, the Levites, priests, musicians and gatekeepers are doing what they are meant to be doing in the temple; and "all Israel" are doing what they are meant to do – by financially supporting them. The chapter ends with a jubilant celebration to dedicate the rebuilt city wall.

6. Living according to God's standards Chapter 13

After 12 years in Jerusalem as the governor of Judah (5:14), and with the wall rebuilt and dedicated (12:27ff), Nehemiah returned to Susa to resume his responsibilities to King Artaxerxes.

Some time later, he comes back to Jerusalem for a second term as its Governor. We don't know how long he was gone, but it was long enough for the Israelites to break the specific promises they had made to God in chs 10-11 relating to 3 areas of their lives – their marriages, the Sabbath and their upkeep of the temple.

Read chapter 13 : 1 - 14

Notes

- 13:1-2 **Ammonite & Moabite** : Both were Lot's descendants from his incestuous encounter with his daughters (Gen 19:33-38) which is why they are linked together as unacceptable relationships. The encounter with Balaam only involved the Moabites (Numbers 22-25). This law was given because God did not want His people to be sucked into the false-god worshipping culture around them.
- 13:4 **Tobiah** was an Ammonite (2:19) and a non-Jew. His presence in the temple was forbidden by God's Law (Deut 23:3-4) and would require purification of the whole area from ritual uncleanness.
- 13:25 **tore out their hair** : Hair pulling was a common practice of Old Testament times. Isaiah 50:6 suggest that beard plucking was a form of punishment and 2 Sam 10:4-5 suggest that a man who had forcibly had his beard removed was the subject of humiliation. (See also Ezra 9:3)

1. What went wrong in the temple during Nehemiah's absence from Jerusalem? (vs 4-7, 10)

2. How does Nehemiah respond? (vs 8-9,11-13)

3. What do you make of Nehemiah's prayer in verse 14? With what tone or attitude do you think Nehemiah prayed?

Read chapter 13:15-30

4. Look at what the people promised regarding the sabbath in Nehemiah 10:31 and then at the reality in 13:15-22.

- What has happened?
- What does Nehemiah do about it?
- Why does this matter? (vs 17,22)

5. Look at what the people promised regarding marriage in Nehemiah 10:30, and then at 13:23-27.

- What has happened?
- What does Nehemiah do about it?
- Why does this matter? (vs24,26)

6. What would be the implications of the children not being able to speak the Israelite language? (v24)

7. Notice how zealously Nehemiah reacts to the people's sins

- where does he rebuke the people?
- where does he remind the people?
- where does he restore the people?

- Have you ever felt the same zeal for God's standards?

8. Look at Nehemiah's short prayers in this chapter (vs 14, 22b, 29, 31b). What was his major concern? (*Note: "Remember me" is a call for God's intervention, not an attempt to jog His memory.*)

How is this relevant to us today?

Choose one, or more, of the following questions, to discuss and apply

9. The sins of the community in Jerusalem could be described as :

- a) cronyism (vs 4-9) *i.e. showing favour to a close friend or relation*
- b) lack of support for full time servers and ministers (vs 10-13)
- c) commercial expediency (vs 15-22)
- d) loss of spiritual identity (vs 23-27)

To what extent do these, or similar issues, still tempt God's people to bend and break His rules? Share examples.

10. The message of the book of Nehemiah is much more than just a record of a physical return of the people to the Promised Land or the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem. It has many spiritual lessons about rebuilding and reforming a community of God's people.

What lessons do you find most relevant to your own circumstances?

12. As you have considered Nehemiah's prayers, actions and achievements for the Lord in these studies, what aspects of his character have particularly caught your attention?

Remember One Thing [R.O.T.] :-

How has the whole book of Nehemiah encouraged you and challenged you concerning the role you play in “building up” and growing the people of God at All Saints?

In Conclusion

At the end of the book we see that the people of Israel did not remain faithful to God. After the wholehearted commitment to building the city walls (chapters 3-6), the “heart and soul” repentance (chapter 8) and the joyous re-dedication (chapter 10), they drifted away. ***The people had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, but ultimately, they were not a rebuilt people.*** Their repentance proved only to be skin-deep.

Throughout the book, Nehemiah has been tossed back and forth between identifying with God’s people, whom he loves and serves, and distancing himself from them when they sin against God. Nehemiah despaired of Israel and knew that judgement remained. For this reason, he asks that God will recognise his own acts of service and spare him in his steadfast love (13:22). He had done what he could, but he could not truly rebuild either the place of God or the people of God.

What a devastating place to end the Old Testament story. We are left crying out for someone who can permanently sort out the mess we find ourselves in.

The only answer is in a totally new covenant (Jer 31:31-34) and a brand new Jerusalem (Heb 11:10) that will be brought into being through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the giving of His living transforming Spirit. Only this will transform the naturally perverse inclinations of the human heart.