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**St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church,
Heliopolis, Cairo - Egypt**

Contemplations on
Nehemiah

Father Daoud Lamie

Translated from Arabic by:
Dr. Magda Sourial

Book's Name : Contemplations on Nehemiah

The Writer : Father Daoud Lamie

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Publisher : St. Mark's Church, Heliopolis.

Edition : 1st Edition / April 2010

Printing Press : Nubar Printing House

Registration Number: / 2010



His Holiness Pope Shenouda the 3rd

**Pope of Alexandria
& Patriarch of St. Mark's Diocese**

***“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”
(Coloss. 3:16)***

With the grace of God we introduce a series of studies in both the Old and the New Testaments. These were in the form of sermons given during spiritual meetings. Such contemplations can be applied in our daily life.

With the prayers of our Holy father Pope Shenouda III, the teacher of Christendom, we wish you good spiritual nourishment from the living word of God.

May our LORD compensate everyone who laboured in this book. We hope that readers remember us in their prayer.

Glory and praise be to God The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit now and forever.

Father Daoud Lamie

Introduction

Before we study this book, we must know:

1. The position of this book from the Holy Bible and the history of the world.
2. The direction of events in this book.

This requires us to have a look at the history of humanity in the Old Testament starting from Adam, Noah and the flood, and then making a new start with Noah and his family. After a while, a new period started with God choosing His people, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob whom God called Israel. The descendants of Jacob were twelve tribes; one of them was Joseph who took them to Egypt where they remained for 400 years. Moses, their saviour, appeared and got them out of Egypt. He led them across the desert of Sinai for 40 years till they reached Palestine. Then Joshua came and divided Canaan (Palestine) between them.

After Joshua, a new period called the “Judges” started. During this period, the people were ruled by a group of Judges. The judge was a leader or a saviour sent by God to His people Israel.

Due to the people of Israel’s deviation from God, He left them to the people around them to humiliate and enslave them, so they screamed to God asking for a saviour i.e. a judge like Samson, Gideon or Jephthah. The period of judges lasted 400 years during which the people of Israel deviated from God almost ten times, each time returning to God and screaming to be saved.

Samuel was the last judge and the first prophet of the next period. At the end of his period, the people transgressed and asked for an earthly king, although it had been 1000 years since Abraham. They had never asked for a king before because God was their King. Samuel was annoyed, so God said to him: “They have not refused you but it is I they refused so that I do not rule over them”. He ordained Saul as their chosen king, then “David” who was God’s choice, followed by king “Solomon”.

Remember:

Moses was 1,500BC

David and Solomon 1,000BC

During the period of David and Solomon, the kingdom settled and became the strongest kingdom on earth. Solomon's temple was built 950 BC and was the first permanent place of worship.

Solomon died after building the temple, his children and their descendants did not follow David's way in worshipping God. Due to their deviation, the kingdom was divided into two:

- (1) The Northern Kingdom "The Kingdom of Israel".
- (2) The Southern Kingdom "The Kingdom of Judah".

They were continuously at war with each other.

From the end of Solomon's period till the end of the Old Testament, all the kings of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) without exception were in a poor spiritual state. Very few of the kings of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) were better spiritually than the rest.

God continued to warn them to come back and follow the footsteps of David, to live in the light and follow Moses' commandments, but they remained stubborn so God threatened to enslave them to the surrounding large kingdom. They were enslaved to the kingdom of Assyria, then Babylon and later the kingdom of Persia.

Due to their humiliation in captivity, they came back to God screaming. He sent them prophets to reassure them that they will return back home from captivity. During their captivity, part of the temple was destroyed as well as the wall of Jerusalem, most of the city was burnt and men and youth were taken into captivity including Daniel and Ezekiel.

They started to come back from captivity in stages and their worry was to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple and regain their glory as the chosen people of God.

During this time, “Nehemiah” appeared among the righteous prophets who came in the last quarter of the Old Testament: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. They wrote their 16 prophecies in the last period before the coming of Christ, Glory be to Him, 800BC to 400BC. Their message was for people to repent and return to God. They also prophesied the coming of Jesus Christ the saviour.

Summary of the captivity of the Kingdom of Judah and the contemporary prophets:

The captivity of Judah (during the rule of Babylon)

During the rule of the last three kings of Judah (Jehoiakim – Jehoiakin and Zedekiah), the kingdom of Judah was captivated at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in three stages:

1. In the year 606BC (the rule of Jehoiakim) Nebuchadnezzar took some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles. Daniel and the three youths were among them. (Daniel 1:1-4)
2. In the year 597BC (the rule of Jehoiakin), Jehoiakim was taken captive to Babylon with his family, his slaves and the mighty men of valour. There were 10,000 captives in addition to all the craftsmen. None remained except the poorest people of the land, and he carried all the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house. The prophet Ezekiel was among the captives (2Kings 24:14). During that time, false prophets appeared among the captives, promising them that they would soon return but the great prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel warned the people and resisted the false prophets. Jeremiah sent them messages from Jerusalem telling them that they would remain in

captivity for 70 years from the time of their first activity and advising them to build houses for themselves, to plant gardens (Jeremiah 29), and to remain in their faith, despite their captivity in a pagan land. He encouraged the people remaining with him in Judah to stay subjected to the king of Babylon.

Ezekiel was among them in the land of captivity, encouraging them. He saw a vision in Babylon by the river of Khabour prophesying the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple.

In fact, the people in Babylon had some freedom, their captivity was not so severe, but they longed for the Holy City. This was expressed in psalm 137 which was written during that period “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion....”

3. In the year 587BC (during the reign of Zedekiah), the last king of Judah Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem for 18 months, and the army of Babylon entered the city, destroyed

it and burnt the temple. They moved the treasures of the temple to Babylon and captivated the rest of the people leaving a few farmers. Jeremiah refused the secure life in Babylon, preferring the ruins of Jerusalem that he loved (many surrendered to hunger and disease later on). The great city of Jerusalem did not exist anymore. The number of captives was between 62,000 and 70,000.

Return from captivity (the time of Persian rule)

- Persia inherited all the property of Babylon but granted the people freedom of worship.
- In the year 538, Cyrus, the king of Persia issued a proclamation permitting all the Jews in Babylon to go back to Jerusalem and build the temple (2 Chronicles 36:22), Ezra 1:1). He gave them back all the temple utensils, which had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon.
- The prophets prophesied the return from captivity, which they related to the falling of Babylon (Isaiah 1:17, Daniel 9:1) at the hands of Media and Persia (Daniel 8:20). Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus the great will be the one to set the

people free (Isaiah 44:28, 1:45). Jeremiah prophesied that the period of captivity would be 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11).

- After Cyrus' proclamation, the Jews returned in two stages (see table 1). They took the temples utensils, which were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. The captivity in Babylon and Persia was not like that in Egypt. The Jews had freedom of worship; some of them occupied high positions in the country (Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer. Daniel and the three youths were ministers of the kingdom). It was not easy for them to go back to Jerusalem, which was destroyed.
- They went back and started to build the temples in 537BC. The work stopped for a while and two great personalities appeared Haggai and Zechariah who encouraged the people to carry on the work after they left to build their own houses (Zech 7:4, Hagg. 2:1). Building the temple took 22 years. This is the temple that was renovated by Herod and which Christ taught in (John 2:14).
- Zerubbabel led the building of the temple (Ezra 3:5-14). When he died, the enthusiasm of the Jews died down and hope in the return of Judah's descendants to the throne was

lost. Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament encouraged the people to fulfil their Holy promise.

- The people were troubled in the land of Judah as life was cruel. The bad news reached Persia and Nehemiah (king Artaxerxes cupbearer) found favour with the king who allowed him to lead a group of Jews so that he became the governor of Judah. He went back in 444BC and encouraged the people to build the 12 gates of Jerusalem (Neh. 3). They finished building the gates in 52 days only (Neh. 6). Nehemiah went back to the Persian Palace after he ruled over the Jews in Jerusalem for 12 years. He went back to Jerusalem to rule a second period during which Moses Law was found and read to the people.
- The Jews enjoyed relative freedom for two centuries under Persian rule. Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther recorded this period.

Nehemiah as a person:

He was a Jewish captive, during the captivity that started in Babylon and continued during the Persian rule in a Persian district called “Shushan”.

He was in a high position as the “king’s cupbearer or head of the king’s office”. This was a high political and social position. The king’s cupbearer had to be faithful and trustworthy as there was always a danger of him poisoning the king.

Nehemiah went to build the gates of Jerusalem in spite of the resistance of the enemy. He also built the spirit of the people, trying to make them believe in prayer and hard work. He struggled with God and His people and instilled in them the spirit of hope.

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Chapter One

Nehemiah's Prayer



“The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. It came to pass in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel, that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.” (Neh.1:1-2)

There was no history before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, glory be to Him. Today, history is related to the birth of our Lord (BC) before Christ and AD (after Christ). Previously, history was related to the kings and the periods of their rule e.g. referring certain historical events to the twentieth year of the rule of Artaxerxes or Cyrus. This continued till the birth of our Lord Jesus.

Nehemiah worked as king Artaxerxes' cupbearer in Shushan. While Nehemiah was at the palace, a person called Hanani (related to Nehemiah's predecessors) came to him with men from the tribe of

Judah. Nehemiah asked them about Jerusalem and the condition of the people.



“And they said to me, ‘The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.’ So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” (Neh. 1:3-4)

Nehemiah was honoured and occupied a great position as a minister in the kingdom of Persia, which was the greatest kingdom of the world in those days.

Here appeared the first good quality of Nehemiah as a holy man, which was his love to his people and his Church. In spite of being so far away from Jerusalem for many years and not knowing the people left behind in Jerusalem, he, as a servant of God and a spiritual leader, was very upset and sad because of the destruction of Jerusalem and the reproach of its people. He said ***“I sat down”***

meaning sat on the floor, which was a sign of humility and sadness as they used to sit on the floor crying with bitterness.

Nehemiah sat down and cried for the people even though they deserved to be punished for their stubbornness and their deviation from God who kept warning them to return to Him.

The first question which faced us in this chapter is: **To what extent are we spiritually moved by what is happening in the church? How much do we feel the pain of others particularly those who have been fooled by the devil and taken away from God?!!**

We should have the same feelings as Nehemiah, which was the secret of his power. During all his travel, he never stopped fasting and praying. He always thought of other people's problems and did not just live for himself. We did not hear anything about Nehemiah himself or his family during his travel; all his care was for his people (the Church of the Old Testament). Although he was not a priest and was not even related to the tribe of Levi, he was a spiritual person who loved God and suffered on account of the house of God and his humiliated people.

“I fasted and prayed to the God of heaven”. This means that Nehemiah was the writer of this book.



“And I said: I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments.” (Neh.1:5)

Great saints used to start their conversation with God by mentioning His great qualities; we start the Holy mass by **“Oh God, great and eternal”**. This makes us feel the greatness of God and helps the spirituality of our prayer. We say to God (You are holy, You are great, You are just and merciful and You are the controller of all...etc).

Hence you feel the presence of God, and then you can make your request. In most prayers in the Holy Bible, the name of God is not mentioned before all His qualities are mentioned. Most of the time, we start our prayers by giving our requests.

In spite of the fact that Nehemiah lived in a pagan country, every one from the king to the smallest person was worshipping idols. His

prayer proved that he was never affected by their pagan idols, their language or their habits.

No one asked Nehemiah to pray or fast or take the responsibility, but he chose to take the responsibility, fast and pray. He cried and preferred to save the people. On the other hand, most of us would force ourselves to fast and pray!!

The one who keeps the covenant. What is this covenant? It is the covenant between God and His people as mentioned in the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament).

“I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (Leviticus 26:12) i.e. if you don't keep my commandments, I will leave you to be captivated by other people around you.

But the people did not keep His commandments and they lost His blessing. They were not faithful to God and deserved punishment. God is faithful and keeps His covenant. **“If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (2Timothy 2:13).**

Hence we can say to God: **You LORD remain faithful and true to Your word but we are unfaithful and untrue to our word.**

God does not only keep His covenant but He is also merciful to those who persist in asking for His mercy.



“Please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father’s house and I have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.” (Neh. 1:6-7)

Here we see the greatness of Nehemiah; he humbled himself in front of God, fasted and cried for days. He prayed day and night so that God may have mercy on His people. This is the greatness of saints.

Nehemiah was very humble: it was never mentioned that he sinned against God and yet he asked God for forgiveness of his sins and the sins of his people. He said: **“I and the house of my father have**

sinned, Have mercy on us”. These words had the same meaning as when the priest says during the Holy Mass “Let not my sins and the abominations of my heart deprive the people of the grace of The Holy Spirit” (The last confession).

Nehemiah admitted that he and the house of his father had sinned against the Lord and since the Lord is Just, they deserved what happened to them. He said my people and I had sinned against You and did not keep the commandments, statues, or the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses as mentioned in the Torah. **“They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one” (Rom. 3:12)**

God, glory be to Him, becomes very happy when you come to Him feeling humble, and subdued in acceptance of His punishment, He would then lift the punishment quickly.



“Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter

you among the nation; but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name'.” (Neh. 1:8-9)

Nehemiah was humble: he knew how to talk to God and praise Him. He also had such wisdom in praying, reminding God of His promise to Moses 1,000 years ago. If we are unfaithful You will scatter us among the nations, but if we come back to You, You will gather us even from the furthest part of the world. Nehemiah thought he was in the furthest part of the land, as Shushan was situated between Iraq and Iran and was very far away from Jerusalem. America and Australia were not discovered yet and the end of the world was India.

Nehemiah spoke to God by praising Him first. He spoke to Him with humility, bowing to the floor with tears. He confessed his sins and the sins of those around him, reminding God of His promises. Then he spoke to God with persistence and this makes God happy when we pray.



“Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand.” (Neh. 1:10)

Nehemiah said to God, You have done great things with Your people in the past; You got them out of Egypt and helped them cross the Red Sea, the whole world saw Your power in them. After all this you want to leave them to perish?

I also say: “I am an unworthy sinner” but what about my baptism, and the Holy Spirit that lives in me? What about Your Blood that You spilt on the Cross for me? And You took my flesh and came to earth for my sake? Are You going to waste all this hard work?! Please have mercy on us, not because we deserve it but because of all You had to put up with?”



“ ‘O LORD, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I

pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man' For I was the king's cupbearer." (Neh. 1:11)

Here also there was a kind of humility. One of Nehemiah's virtues was that he did not feel that he was the only one praying to God for the sake of the people but there were others whose prayers will be answered, and God will perform miracles for them. Nehemiah said: please accept my prayer and the prayers of Your servants.

When you pray, remember you are not the only one zealous for the Church, you are not the only one who feels responsible for the return of others to God. But there are others who also pray, and God might listen to them more than you even if they are at the beginning of their spiritual path and still learning to pray.

Nehemiah started everything with prayer especially for the service and the salvation of the people. He asked God for success, mercy and grace in the eyes of the king, so that the king may allow him to go and build Jerusalem.

Contemplations on the First Chapter:

This chapter is the key to all that happens later on, it shows many of Nehemiah's virtues.

He was a modest man of prayer. He knew how to fast, knew his responsibility without being asked, and humbled himself in front of God so that He may lift his anger from His people. He knew how to move heaven with his tears and his sighs, he confessed his sins, recalled God's promises, and always remembered that there were others who pray persistently. Nehemiah had a positive personality.

His prayers were the beginning of a spiritual awakening and because of his strong prayers; God gave him blessings, grace and success. What could not be achieved in about 90 years was achieved in a miraculous way in less than two months. The wall of the city was built in 52 days in spite of the poor facilities.

No matter how difficult the problems and trials are, always raise your heart to God in prayer and humble yourself in front of Him as Nehemiah did.

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

+ “I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, ‘I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father’s house and I have sinned.’” (Neh. 1:4-7)

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Chapter Two

Nehemiah's Spiritual Ambition

- + Nehemiah's request to go to Jerusalem.
- + Nehemiah's examination of the wall of Jerusalem.
- + His insistence on building the wall.
- + The scorn of the enemy.



“And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. Therefore the king said to me ‘Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.’ So I became dreadfully afraid.” (Neh. 2:1-2)

Nehemiah went on praying, and fasting with tears, for the sake of Jerusalem and his people, since January. His face showed signs of sadness and depression. Three months later in April, in the twentieth year of the reign of king Artaxerxes, when Nehemiah the cupbearer of the king was giving him wine, the king noticed the sadness and depression on his face.

The king could have dismissed Nehemiah or cut his head off as in those days the kings of Babylon, Persia and Rome were considered Gods i.e. Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar considered themselves Gods and called the months of July and August after their names, and like the rest of the Gods Mars, April, and June.

Because of Nehemiah's prayer, God gave him grace in the eyes of the king. The king loved Nehemiah, so he asked him the reason for the sorrow of his heart, which made him look sad especially that he was not sick. Nehemiah was afraid and felt that God was telling him to speak as He put mercy in the king's heart.



“And said to the king, ‘May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?’ Then the king said to me, ‘What do you request?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven.” (Neh. 2:3-4)

After Nehemiah saluted the king in the traditional way with the words “may the king live forever”, he wisely explained the reason

for his sadness which was the destruction of Jerusalem. He did not say Jerusalem the great city, but he said Jerusalem the place of my father's tombs. This was wise of Nehemiah as he spoke the king's language. In those days they valued the antiquities of their fathers and grandfathers.

When the king knew the reason for his sadness, he sympathised with him and asked him what he wanted. Nehemiah was a man of prayer, so he raised his heart to God and prayed before he answered the king "I prayed to the God of heaven" It was a quick prayer: it could have been "God give me grace, or have mercy on me and help me... or God please speak for me."

No one can pray to God while present with other people except the one who is used to pray to God alone for many hours and is used to direct his mind towards God at any moment. A good example is the prophet Elijah who used to say to king Ahals "Living is the Lord whom I stand in front of" as if he was telling him that God was standing with them as he was speaking to both of them at the same time.

“So I prayed to the God of heaven” It was a scream to God, but he never mentioned the actual prayer!



“And I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tomb, that I may rebuild it.’ Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him) ‘How long will your journey be? And when will you return?’ So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.” (Neh. 2:5-6)

Nehemiah asked the king politely to allow him to go and build the city of Judah. His request was not logical as it was the kings of Babylon and Persia who destroyed Jerusalem in the first place. Also he was the king’s cupbearer and it would not be easy for the king to give him up so suddenly. But the grace of God was with Nehemiah who raised his heart to God praying before everything.

In the presence of the Queen, the king asked Nehemiah to set a date for his mission. Nehemiah gave him a range date for his departure, but could not tell him the time of his return. We will see later that he stayed in Jerusalem about 12 years while it was being built. He returned to the king, and then back to Jerusalem.



“Furthermore I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy.’ And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.” (Neh. 2:7-8)

Nehemiah was wise and clever, it was not enough for him asking the king’s permission to go, but through God’s guidance, he knew that he would pass through Iraq and Jordan and also Syria and Palestine till he reached Jerusalem. All these countries were occupied, and he knew that he would need papers from the king permitting him to go through till he reached the city of Judah.

He also asked for a letter to give to Asaph (the keeper of the king’s forest) in order to give him timber to make beams for the gates of the Citadel and the house he would occupy. He did not mention that he would build the house of God in case the king would not like the

idea. Although Nehemiah was a pagan, the king gave him all his needs.

“According to the good hand of my God upon me”: he did not say that the gift was the result of his effect on the king who sympathised with him, but he related everything to the hand of God which made the king sympathised with him and gave him all his needs i.e. “God’s grace and God’s gifts.”

Being a man of prayer, no matter how wise, patient and virtuous he was, he related every gift to God and not to himself.



“Then I went to the governors in the region beyond the River, and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well- being of the children of Israel.” (Neh. 2:9-10)

Tobiah the Ammonite official: related to the Ammonites, sons of Lot who were the enemies of the Jews, the same as the Horonites and Arals who were sworn enemies of the Jews.

Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab resembled the devil's team.

They were not Jews but they lived in the areas around Judah "Jerusalem". They would benefit from the destruction of Jerusalem, so that they could lay their hands on the land and used it to distribute their goods. Their hearts were filled with anger because Nehemiah wanted good for the people of Israel, so they conspired to stop Nehemiah from building Jerusalem and doing good for the people of Israel by the hand of God.

It is obvious that when one has spiritual zeal for the house of God and is busy with saving souls and returning them to God, the devil will never leave him but tries hard to stop the work of God. But because his heart is always with God, so he gets what he wants.



“So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem; nor was there any animal with me, except the one on which I rode. And I went out by night through the Valley Gate to the Serpent Well and the Refuse Gate and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool, but there was no room for the animal under me to pass. So I went up in the night by the valley, and viewed the wall; then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work.” (Neh. 2:11-16)

He arrived at Jerusalem with a few men who were sent with him by the king of Persia. He stayed there for three days.

Nehemiah’s wisdom showed again when he said “I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do”.

In serving God and in other affairs, it is wise not to talk too much about your spiritual plans and your projects in the service. It is better

that these remain in your heart between you and God because the devil is waiting to delay and stop the work of God.

Nehemiah did not tell anyone of what God had put in his heart regarding the building of Jerusalem. His hope and confidence in God were great for building the city, the gate and the temple and for the return of everyone especially when he saw the severe destruction of the great city. He did not lose hope and did not say that it is useless doing any work, but God gave him grace so he got up in the night in secret and went to examine Jerusalem in order to put a plan for the work of God. He stared at Jerusalem; this was a sign of the following:

+ **Contemplation:** As if he said: Oh God, we were the reason for this destruction, but is it reasonable to go back and build the high walls and the great gates? To go back to build it when we had destroyed it? Jerusalem was a great and a glorified city at the time of David the prophet.

+ **Long Sightedness:** He thought to himself what would he do with such destruction? What would the city look like at the end?

+ **Prayer:** He prayed asking for help and spiritual enlightenment.

He examined all parts of the city and went back without anyone knowing where he went or what he had in mind. Then, he did not tell any of the officials, the nobles, the priests, the workers or the poor people who were left in the city, what was in his heart.



“Then I said to them, ‘You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach.’ And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king’s words that he had spoken to me. So they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ Then they set their hands to this good work.” (Neh. 2:17-18)

Nehemiah discovered that he could build the city on his own. This is a good principle for those who serve God. He thought first of forming an army for God and encouraging it to finish the work. The work was huge and the people were scattered and desperate.

He started by gathering priests, nobles, governors and workers and asked them to work with one spirit under the good hand of God in

building the city. And not be a cause of reproach especially that the city laid waste for many years.

Nehemiah explained to them that the hand of God had been good upon him and that it was God who moved him and encouraged him. Also it was the king of the world “Artaxerxes” who gave him the wood, the permission to go build the city and then to return back.

Here appears the value of encouragement, which every spiritual leader should give to everyone to fulfil the purpose of his or her service.



“But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?’ So I answered them, and said to them, ‘The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.’” (Neh. 2:19-20)

Here starts the three devilish desires: The desires of the eye, the desires of the flesh and the desire of great living, for when the devil

finds a faithful servant who encourages those around him and brings people back to God, he starts to fight him in many ways.

The most famous spiritual war waged by the devil is that in which he uses the weapons of contempt, mockery, belittling a person or an act. You might hear a voice saying: you are not suitable for serving God. It makes you doubt your ability to save yourself, so how can you save others? Then, you keep away and suffer a set back and this is what the devil wants!

The triple desires' devil said to them in a cunning way: How did you know that Nehemiah was true in what he said to you? Could you rebel against the king? All these buildings were considered a kind of rebellion against the king because he did not give you formal permission. It was understood from this that they should inform the king.

The devil might deceive you saying: who told you that God approved of your service or it was Him who invited you to serve? He did not invite you but you invited yourself, you deceived yourself! This is the voice of the devil to stop your service.

Nehemiah used his famous motto **“The God of heaven will prosper us, we His servants will arise and build.”** Grace, blessing and success are from the hand of God and not from us. But we should strive and do all we can in the spiritual way. A servant should always remind those who work with him, that the work is the work of God, and success is also from God.

There is another weapon you can use to fight evil thoughts, especially thoughts of doubt and despair that tell you: “you do not know, you are weak, you are not suitable”. Escape from these thoughts, do not discuss them but discard them quickly, and concentrate on prayer and positive actions.

Nehemiah did not care, did not discuss the possibility of his work with them because it is God who would work and give success to those who work with Him **“but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.”**

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

- + I prayed to the God of heaven. (Neh 2:4)
- + The good hand of my God upon me. (Neh. 2:8)
- + I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do. (Neh.2:12)
- + And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done. (Neh. 2:16)
- + The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build. (Neh. 2:20)

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Chapter Three

The Building of the Wall

This chapter contains many names and the building starts in it. Nehemiah wisely asked each one, starting from the priests to the smallest person, to build in front of his own house. In this way the wall would be completed. He told them so, to encourage them and take away their feeling of despair as no one could build such a great city. They arose to do what they were asked according to the good hand of God upon them.

There is a very important spiritual meaning in this. If every Christian builds his house and his spiritual life on the rock, bringing up his children in the fear of God, the Church will be strong as we are all members in the one Church, members in one body, the head of which is our Lord Jesus Christ, Glory be to Him.

In the old days, there was neither Sunday school nor spiritual meetings but every Christian house built a strong spiritual wall for itself. Now, in spite of having many spiritual meetings and Sunday schools, the spiritual wall is incomplete because many do not want to build that part of the wall in front of their houses.

Chapter Four

The Spiritual Wall

- + The conspiracy of Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite.
- + Placing guards along the wall.



“But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, ‘What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer Sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish-stones that are burned?’ Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, ‘Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall.’” (Neh. 4:1-3)

The triple desires’ devil was filled with anger because of the seriousness of the people in building the wall. Sanbaalat said mockingly: Could these weak Jews revive the heaps of dust and transform them to stones to build the wall?! Who would allow them

to offer sacrifices? Would the king permit them to complete the building?

The devils sympathised with each other, so the second devil “Tobiah the Ammonite” spoke in the same mocking way saying: “Whatever they build, if a fox goes up on it, it will break down their stone wall.”

This is what happens often with God’s servant, he might say to himself: I am a weak person; I do not know whether what I say to people will change them! Be warned, this is the talk of the devil.



“Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders. So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.” (Neh. 4:4-6)

Nehemiah raised the matter immediately to God in prayer: Look O God, how these devils mock Your work and Your service. Avenge

us and stop the work of the devils, disrupt their conspiracy, stop their evil's wisdom. The matter was raised to God, so that He might answer them with his strength.

The entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. When everyone works with one heart and with spiritual zeal, the work must be completed.



*“Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion.”
(Neh.4:7-8)*

Those hostile devils conspired to make war on Jerusalem and break the wall.

We pray at the end of psalm 50: “Build the walls of Jerusalem, then You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering.” The spiritual meaning of this

verse is to build a wall around yourself, your family and your people, a wall that separates you from the world, so you do not let sin go in and out of your house. Also make a wall around your senses and thoughts, a wall without openings.

The person, who strives and makes a spiritual wall around himself and his family, when he prays, offers a sacrifice of love which God will accept.

When serving the poor and simple:

- **Try to build** a spiritual wall around them.
- **Teach** them that our Lord Jesus Christ, Glory be to Him, is our God and not an ordinary person.
- **Teach them** “Our Father who art in heaven...”
- **Direct them** to the Church for confession and communion...

Spiritual upbringing, spiritual knowledge and faith, are walls protecting man from worldly wars.



“Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night. Then

Judah said, 'The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall.' And our adversaries said, 'They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease.' So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, 'From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us.'" (Neh. 4:9-12)

Every time the devil fights you, your only solution is to pray and raise the matter to God. The war this time came from two sides: war of despair from inside, from the midst of Judah, which is more difficult. **"The strength of the laborers is failing and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall."** This is the same as a servant saying that all we do is wrong and unnecessary as people do not change. Another voice says: "If I myself sin, how can I encourage people to come to God?"

The adversaries say **"They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease."** Our enemy is the devil and those who move him, the conspiracy of the evil ones and the rising up of the enemies, hidden and manifest. They want to divide us and tear away the love and peace from the Church.

Some of the weak Jews mingled with the servants and tried to shake their confidence and make them doubt their work and their success “They told us ten times, from whatever place you turn, they will be upon us”. Thus they magnified the size of the devil to convince the servants that they were the losers.



“Therefore I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people ‘Do not be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.’” (Neh. 4:13-14)

The people were frightened of their strong enemies. Nehemiah, being a man of prayer, was the only one not affected. He told them to stand with their swords, spears and bows around the wall. He continued encouraging them and reminded them of the presence of the great God with them always, so they should fight for their families and do not leave them in the hands of their enemies.

Looking at the strength of evil makes us frightened and weak, but looking at “The greatness of God” makes us feel strong and safe. When St. Peter looked at Christ, Glory be to Him, he walked on the high waves, but when he looked at the sea, he was afraid and nearly sank.



“And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work.” (Neh. 4:15)

God started His work with them and brought the devil’s plot to nothing. The devil is a coward, if he finds you close to God: praying, reading psalms, fasting, confessing and having communion, he escapes.

The war ended before it started because of Nehemiah’s standing firm, praying and encouraging his people. So everyone was prepared for building and guarding the wall.



*“So it was, from that time on, that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders were behind all the house of Judah. Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me.”
(Neh.4:16-18)*

By God’s guidance, Nehemiah has put a new plan for building the wall and guarding it at the same time. Thus every servant should build good thoughts and fight every bad thought.

Someone might need to be taught praying, starting by making the sign of the Cross, the Lord’s Prayer “Our Father who art in heaven”, and to be guided to the spiritual way: confession and Communion. Another person might need to guard what he has. So he should be reminded of the psalms that protects and sends the devil away. Spiritual reading, spiritual righteousness and virtues guard the person against sin.

“Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me.”

The sword and the trumpet are symbols of the word of God.

The trumpet: is a symbol of teaching the word of God which guides the people to the spiritual way, and encourages their continuous repentance, strife and faith.

The sword: is a symbol of everyone’s relationship with the word of God, this special relationship which makes the word of God **“living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart”** (Hebrews 4:12)

For this reason, the musician shouted: **“Gird Your sword upon Your thigh, o Mighty One, with Your glory and Your majesty.”** (Psalm 45:3)



“Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, ‘The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.’ So we labored in the work, and half of the men held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared. At the same time I also said to the people, ‘Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day. So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, except that everyone took them off for washing.’” (Neh. 4:19-23)

“Our God will fight for us.”

Although Nehemiah made a very wise military plan to attack the enemy, he tried to comfort his army by telling them that their victory was granted because **“our God will fight for us”**.

Thus man should strive spiritually and be prepared to fight evil and not be lazy but be serious and zealous in spiritual life. This way we set a good example for others to follow.

We should believe that: **“those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”**(2kings 6:16)

The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall: from generation to generation “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few.”(Luke10:2)

The real strength is in the trumpet (the word of God), the group work (the one true faith), spiritual strife (guarding day and night) and setting a good example.

“Neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes; except that everyone took them off for washing.”

Not taking their clothes off is a symbol of hanging on to the new life which started in the baptistery **“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27)**

Going to the water is a symbol of the continuous repentance (washing). **“He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean” (John 13:10)**

The most important spiritual symbols so far are:

+ 1st symbol: *“The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build.” (Neh.2:20)*

+2nd symbol: *“With one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon.”(Neh. 4: 17)*

+3rd symbol: *“Our God will fight for us” (Neh.4:20)*

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

+ “We made our prayer to our God.” (Neh. 4:9)

+ “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, great and awesome” (Neh. 4:14)

+ “With one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon” (Neh.4:17)

+ “Our God will fight for us” (Neh.4:20)

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Chapter Five

Love of the Poor

- + **Complaining of hunger and poverty.**
- + **Nehemiah economised in his personal expenses to help the poor.**



“And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. For there were those who said, ‘We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live.’ There were also some who said, ‘We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine.’ There were also those who said, ‘We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.’” (Neh. 5:1-5)

After Nehemiah laid down a stable foundation for the spiritual work, by injecting an active and zealous spirit among the people, and the

wall was almost completed, he faced big problems from within, especially because the city had been laid waste socially and spiritually.

This reminds us that whenever we start any service with great zeal, we discover many problems and wrong doing in the life of those we serve. These problems are present but are hidden. Thus, repentance should be gradual, both the servant and those whom he serves should realise the problem and work together to solve it.

The spiritual work should start by laying the foundation, then building the wall, then repairing the wrong doing bit by bit inside the house.

The problem here is that the Jews of Jerusalem were complaining about each other. It is the problem of the social classes, which is present in every generation. The poor Jews were enslaved to the rich Jews. Some of the poor had to pawn their vines and their houses to buy wheat. Others borrowed silver to pay taxes to the kings as the country was occupied. They sold their children and their siblings as slaves to the rich to buy goods.

This irritating phenomenon is a social and spiritual disease; it goes back many years before the time of Nehemiah. This disease can cause a bigger problem than that of the wall, which was destroyed. We should not ignore such problem.



“And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, ‘Each of you is exacting usury from his brother.’ So I called a great assembly against them. And I said to them, ‘According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?’ Then they were silenced and found nothing to say. Then I said, ‘What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?’” (Neh. 5:6-9)

Nehemiah, the faithful servant, was angry when he heard the screams of the poor Jews who were enslaved by the rich Jews.

His anger was holy; it was not a sin for he was spiritually jealous of his people. This is similar to your anger against yourself when you sin **“Be angry and do not sin”** (Psalm 4:4) or your sadness and

jealousy when you hear of people who left the faith because of poverty or ignorance.

Nehemiah, the faithful servant, said that “**he consulted his own heart**”, as though his heart was his friend. His heart was the house of the Holy Spirit. He entered his own heart and sat with the Spirit of God, asking Him: “What shall I do Lord regarding this big problem?” The rich and poor were one nation but the rich enslaved and humiliated the poor.

The spiritual wisdom develops from isolating yourself and sitting quietly with God and with your father in confession, so you might be guided by the voice of God, which comes from within. Have faith in your heart and consult with it. The heart, which is filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, could be consulted, you could ask: What shall I do Lord in such and such?

Nehemiah started to blame the nobles for lending their fellow poor brethren with interest. The rich nobles expected him to take their side but he embarrassed them by saying” we, the Jews in captivity, sympathise with one another, and the rich ones buy our poor

brethren and enslaves them. How could you enslave your brethren the Jews and do not want to set them free? How much money do you want for your own flesh and blood to set them free? They were ashamed of themselves and could not answer Nehemiah who had come from the land of captivity, leaving behind his glory, to build Jerusalem and free the people. For Nehemiah, this was not a social matter but a spiritual one. The people did not fear God, which angered God and gave the enemy the chance to reproach them because they enslaved and humiliated one another.



“I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them.’ So they said, ‘We will restore it, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say.’ Then I called the priests, and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, ‘So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.’ And all the assembly said, ‘Amen!’ and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.” (Neh.5:10-13)

Nehemiah with his purity and fear of God, wanted the people's repentance to be complete, and this could never be done without improving their situation with one another. He said to them that God would remain angry with them as long as they continued enslaving their brethren, so they should give their brethren their rights and set them free.

They were all afraid because of his words and agreed to what he asked them to do. True repentance is never complete without acts of repentance and definite decisions to change one's way of life. This reminds us of Zacchaeus complete repentance: **“Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the LORD, ‘Look LORD, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he is also is a son of Abraham;’” (Luke 19:8-9)**

“Then I called the priests, and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.” Even the priests made the same mistake; some of them were rich and enslaved their

brethren, lending them money with interest. He made them promise to stop doing that and warned them against humiliating their brethren. When Nehemiah uttered those words (he was speaking with God's tongue), everybody said "Amen". They praised God and did what he said.

Here appears another virtue of Nehemiah that he showed no pride in his achievements i.e. in his role in building the wall, challenging the enemy and correcting the mistakes of the Jews. It was not glory for himself that moved him but it was the spirit of God.

Spiritual zeal does not stop at a certain level but goes on from glory to glory.

Nehemiah's strength came from God, so he was not afraid of confronting the great and noble.

The person who lives in the light and the truth will never be afraid of anyone and can reveal justice and truth. The word of truth always echoes and moves people to repentance. This happened almost five centuries later when John the Baptist stood against king Herod saying: **"It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife"** (Mark 6:18)



“Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of king Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor’s provisions. But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God.” (Neh. 5:14-15)

God gave Nehemiah great blessings, but he never used his power for his own benefit and never treated the poor people unfairly as the previous governors did by imposing heavy taxes on them.

Nehemiah feared God; He was honest and pure in the eyes of everyone because of his fear of God which is the head of wisdom and the beginning of righteousness.



“Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work.” (Neh. 5:16)

In spite of all the problems and challenges, Nehemiah never forgot his main purpose, which was building the wall.

Quite often, the devil distracts us from our main purpose in serving God by such problems as housing, education, health etc. and we forget what is more important which is building the spiritual wall, saving souls and returning them to God.

Nehemiah never bought land or anything for himself, and the others followed his example of righteousness and honesty.



“And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor’s provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people.” (Neh.5:17-18)

Nehemiah never asked for his rights and never boasted of his riches. He even spent his own money on the service, making daily feasts for his people and also for the neighbouring gentiles. His heart was full of mercy and feelings for others, especially for the poor. He never

asked for his rights but always gave the others because God gave him generous gifts.

He concentrated on promoting love amongst the workers by offering feasts (Agape), which had a great effect on uniting their hearts.



“Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people” (Neh.5:19)

We very rarely find such a saying in the Holy book. It is not out of pride or asking for a reward from God, but it is the humbleness of a servant saying to God: “There is nothing good in my life, please give me a chance to do good and remember it for me, the same as **“LORD, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom” (Luke 23:42)**

Spiritual exercise:

If you do an act of mercy or any good act, let it be a secret between you and God; do not tell anyone and say: remember O Lord this good act I have done.

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

+ “After serious thought” (Neh5:7)

or (I consulted with my heart)

+ “I did not do so, because of the fear of God” (Neh.5:15)

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Chapter Six

Unjust Scandals against Nehemiah

- +Increased resistance against building the wall.
- +Completing the building of the wall.



“Now it happened when Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall, and that there were no breaks left in it (though at that time I had not hung the doors in the gates), that Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, ‘Come, let us meet together among the villages in the plain of ono.’ But they thought to do me harm. So I sent messengers to them, saying, ‘I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?’ But they sent me this message four times, and I answered them in the same manner” (Neh.6:1-4)

They continued to fight Nehemiah and those with him in many ways:

- +They adopted a mocking and discouraging attitude.....so we prayed to God.
- +Then they used a threatening attitude, so we prayed to God.

+They formed an army to fight Nehemiah, so we prayed and our God fought for us.

Every time Nehemiah overcame them by praying and standing firm. Their conspiracy took a different shape, they asked to have a conciliatory meeting with Nehemiah but in fact they wanted to kill him when they met him. Nehemiah refused to meet them because he was occupied with more important business. They never expected Nehemiah to refuse and to persist in refusing putting in consideration that they were great personalities who repeated their request many times.

Nehemiah did not refuse because he was afraid of their conspiracy and betrayal, which he had not known yet, but because he was faithful to his work and did not want to waste time, so God saved him from their conspiracy.

Spiritual Exercise:

The best way to spend your time is to live with God, appreciate your holy responsibility, the precious holy time you spend in your spiritual program, in prayer, in reading the Holy Bible, the spiritual books, the lives of the saints and in serving God. Thus you will be

protected from the conspiracies of the devil, which could lead to many disasters.



“Then Sanballat sent his servants to me as before, the fifth time, with an open letter in his hand. In it was written: it is reported among the nations, and Geshem says, that you and the Jews plan to rebel; therefore, according to these rumours, you are rebuilding the wall, that you may be their king. And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you at Jerusalem, saying, ‘there is a king in Judah!’ Now these matters will be reported to the king. So come, therefore, and let us consult together. Then I sent to him, saying, ‘No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart.’ For they all were trying to make us afraid, saying ‘Their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will not be done.’ Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” (Neh.6:5-9)

The conspiracy of the enemy adopted a different attitude, inventing lies to threaten Nehemiah and frighten him so that he gets confused and retreats from what he is doing.

They threatened to raise the matter to the king of Persia who had sympathised with Nehemiah previously, and sent him to build the wall and gave him all he needed. They threatened to tell him that

Nehemiah wanted to be king of Judah. In spite of all this Nehemiah did not waver and was not affected.

Every conspiracy was treated with: “Now, O God, strengthen my hands.” God stay with me, support me.

The devil has his conspiracies, problems and worries, but we also have our prayer, our service and asking God: “to strengthen my hands.”



“Afterward I came to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was a secret informer; and he said, ‘Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, at night they will come to kill you.’ And I said, ‘Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!’ Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all, but that he pronounced this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this reason he was hired, that I should be afraid and act that way and sin, so that they might have cause for an evil report, that they might reproach me. My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, according to these their works, and the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who would have made me afraid.” (Neh.6:10-14)

Nehemiah was exposed to another very devious conspiracy, the purpose of which was to lose his reputation and his popularity among his people. They paid some false prophet to tell Nehemiah that they would kill him that night, and that he should go and hide in the temple to avoid getting killed, as the Jewish law forbids killing inside the temple whatever happens.

Nehemiah did not believe this false prophet Shemaiah, the son of Delaiah, because he experienced God's protection for him in every step of his way and he was not afraid of death. He said, like a courageous martyr: **"Should such a man as I flee?"** God exposed the conspiracy. Nehemiah made sure that this false prophet was hired by Tobiah and Sanballat to frighten him and make him escape. By this way, people would reproach him and lose confidence in him and the labour would stop.

This could be symbolic to strange teachings that try to interfere with the service, or attempts to make the people doubt their priest or servant of God to delay the service. In all this, we gain victory through prayer and courage.

In the old and new testaments, many false prophets appeared. They were misleading people with magic and the spirit of knowledge, to achieve personal glory. Our Lord Jesus Christ, Glory be to Him, mentioned these false prophets: **“For false Christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.” (Matth. 24:24)**

As Nehemiah asked our just God to remember his work, his faithfulness and those who worked with him, he also asked our just God to judge the evil people according to their evil deeds.



“So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God.” (Neh. 6:15-16)

Building the wall and the gates took 52 days only which caused the enemies and the surrounding nations such fear, as for the devil, it fell when confronted with perseverance, prayer, courage, love of God, purity and wise leadership and with all these, you can reduce

the devil to nothing and humiliate him. In spite of all that, Nehemiah did not relate the victory to himself but to God “for they perceived that this was the work of God.”



“Also in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came to them. For many in Judah were pledged to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shechaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. Also they reported his good deeds before me, and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.” (Neh. 6:17-19)

One of the enemies (Tobiah) tried a new conspiracy by sending letters to the nobles of Judah in Jerusalem trying to win them over to his side, as some were related to him and there were some transactions between him and the nobles of Judah.

Tobiah tried to use the nobles as spies and mediators. Some of them witnessed for Tobiah in front of Nehemiah trying to make peace between them **“Also they reported his good deeds before me”**. Nehemiah was not deceived, and Tobiah started sending letters to Nehemiah again to frighten him.

This is the way of the devil, when his external conspiracies fail; he starts his internal conspiracies, trying to destroy the Church from inside by dividing us and destroying our relationship.

Nehemiah refused to speak or deal with them, so the devil showed its other face (the true evil) by sending direct messages to Nehemiah to frighten him.

Versus to Learn and Contemplate upon:

+ “Now therefore, O God strengthen my hands.” (Neh. 6:9)

+ “This work was done by our God.” (Neh. 6:16)

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Chapter Seven

Organising the Service

- + **Appointing Leaders.**
- + **The Genealogy of those Returning from Captivity.**
- + **Donations for Building the Temple.**



“Then it was, when the wall was built and I had hung the doors, when the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, that I gave the charge of Jerusalem to my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the leader of the citadel, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.” (Neh. 7:1-2)

Nehemiah was wise in choosing both Hanani and Hananiah as leaders of Jerusalem. Hananiah was a faithful man who feared God more than many.

Choosing spiritual leaders should not only be based on spiritual gifts but also on faithfulness and fear of God.



“And I said to them, “Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot; and while they stand guard, let them shut and bar the doors; and appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, one at his watch station and another in front of his own house.” (Neh. 7:3)

After building the wall and settling down, Nehemiah laid down rules and appointed times for opening and shutting the gates to make sure no strangers entered.

To stop the dealings of those who exploited the land and enslaved the Jews like Tobiah, Sanballat and Geshem, the doors were to open only in the sunlight to stop them from working in the dark. He put the responsibility on every one: **“One at his watch station and another in front of his own house.”** Nehemiah was strict in applying the rules. Unfortunately, organisation offends people nowadays. Some people do not care about attending the Gospel before mass and they do not take it seriously, and others do not behave in a manner suitable for God’s children. This is what weakens the Church.



“Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few, and the houses were not rebuilt.” (Neh. 7:4)

In spite of completing the building of the wall and guarding the gates, the houses from inside were laid waste as all concentration was on building the wall to guard the houses.

Thus, the spiritual wall that guards you is more important than any material goods. We often look after our children’s health, education, and all their needs more than their spiritual building, as though we are building the house and leaving the wall! You should care first for the kingdom of heaven and everything else will be given to you.

If there is no spiritual wall, whatever you build will fall apart in a moment. Build the wall before you build the house and make sure that your children are the children of God, everything else comes second. You should set your priorities right.



“Then my God put it into my heart to gather the nobles, the rulers, and the people, that they might be registered by genealogy. And I found a register of the genealogy of those who

had come up in the first return, and found written in it:” (Neh. 7:5)

God Put it into my Heart: The voice of God inside him was clear, leading him, so he advanced step by step in his service. God opened doors for him that were closed. So he started to register the people who returned from captivity to know their children, their rights and their share in the land.

It is important in the service to record names, Church membership, and to examine each case. When you start serving in a certain area, visit each house, know each person and the extent of his/her relationship with God, get to know your flock **“Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds”** (Proverbs 27:23), then start to work.

From verse 6 to verse 62:

He started to register the genealogy, the numbers of the captives, the numbers of those who returned from captivity to Jerusalem and Judah. He also registered those who were captivated by Nebuchadnezzar (king of Babylon), those who returned with Nehemiah and other leaders, and the men of the people of Israel.

The division and records were based on tribes and families and also on cities e.g. the men of Anathoth and the men of Ramah. They were also based on the kind of service they offered e.g. priests, Levites, singers, porters and servants of the temple.



“And of the priests; the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Koz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name. These sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but it was not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood as defiled. And the governor said to them that they should not eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim. Altogether the whole assembly was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty, besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven; and they had two hundred and forty-five men and women singers. Their horses were seven hundred and thirty-six, their mules two hundred and forty-five, their camels four hundred and thirty-five, and donkeys six thousand seven hundred and twenty.” (Neh. 7:63-69)

According to these accounts, some priests’ fathers appeared to have married wives of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, who was a friend of the prophet David (2 Sam17:27, 32-40), but he was not of

the tribe of Levi, so his children were not suitable for priesthood. Nehemiah decided to deprive them of priesthood and forbade them from eating the holy bread “the governor said to them not to eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim” i.e. till he consults with a priest who hears the voice of God in this matter. Here appeared Nehemiah’s great veneration, completed submission to God’s commandments and to his priests, in spite of his great position, his righteousness and wisdom.



“And some of the heads of the fathers’ houses gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury one thousand gold drachmas, fifty basins, and five hundred and thirty priestly garments. Some of the heads of the fathers’ houses gave to the treasury of the work twenty thousand gold drachmas, and two thousand two hundred silver minas. And that which the rest of the people gave was twenty thousand gold drachmas, two thousand silver minas, and sixty-seven priestly garments.

So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the Nethinim, and all Israel dwelt in their cities. When the seventh month came, the children of Israel were in their cities.”
(Neh. 7:70-74)

Nehemiah was given the title of governor. After building the wall, challenging the enemy, examining the genealogy and organising everything. He started to organise the service of the priests and Levites, for they did not have land or any source of income. In order to concentrate on serving the temple without being busy with anything else, all their material needs had to be fulfilled by the people. Nehemiah and some of the rich leaders of the tribes started to give donations to the priests and Levites to make them return to their normal work which was serving the temple only. God's commandment from the beginning was that the Levites should have no share in the land and the other tribes should attend to their needs, every tribe should pay its tithes **“Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.”** (Numbers 18:21)

The Levites should pay also their tithes **“Thus you shall also offer a heave offering to the LORD from all your tithes which you receive from the children of Israel, and you shall give the LORD's heave offering from it to Aaron the priest”** (Numbers 18:28)

Everything that was done from the beginning till the end of chapter seven took six months.

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

+ “My God put it into my heart.” (Neh. 7:5)

* * * * *

Chapter Eight

Mass Repentance

- + **Ezra Reads the Book of the Law of Moses.**
- + **Celebrating the Feast of the Booths.**



“Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra, the priest, brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.” (Neh. 8:1-3)

First, Introducing Ezra, the Scribe and Priest:

Ezra, came long before Nehemiah but was also a contemporary, he led a group of the people of Israel when he returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. He was called the priest and scribe. He wrote one book in the Old Testament (the book of Ezra), which preceded the book of

Nehemiah. When Ezra found that Nehemiah had built the wall and organised everything especially the service of the tabernacle for the priests and Levites, he started to teach them the Law of Moses “The Torah”, which they had ignored for many years. Here appeared the harmony between a spiritual priest like Ezra and a layman like Nehemiah who was a leader and a faithful servant even though he was not a priest.

Ezra carried out very important work in the year 450BC, he collected together the books of the Old Testament (39 books) which were the first lawful chapters “Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth...” Long after Ezra, seven other chapters called the second lawful chapters were added; these are “Tobias, Judith, Wisdom, Joshua son of Syrah, Baruch, Maccabeus I and Maccabeus II”. He also completed the book of Daniel and Esther. Thus, the Old Testament included the right number of books, which were 46 books. When Protestantism appeared in the sixteenth century, the Protestant refused these last seven books and considered the Old Testament as consisting only of the 39 books collected by Ezra. This is not accurate historically or scientifically because the Jews, the Orthodox, the Catholics and

many of the Protestant denominations accepted the second lawful books.

These books are definitely lawful because the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew but in the last centuries before Christ, the formal world language was Greek. The Roman emperor Ptolemy gathered seventy of the Jewish elderly who had a good command of Greek and Hebrew to translate the Old Testament (all 46 books) to the Greek language. This was called the translation of the septuagint relating it to the seventy elders who translated it. Our Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles used verses from this translation.

This highlights the importance of the role of Ezra, the priest and scribe, not only because he wrote the book of Ezra, but because he compiled the books of the Old Testament (39 books) to which another seven books were added to make a total of 46 books.

The people gathered in a hall from morning till noon so that Ezra could read to them the book of the Law of Moses. It was the same as a spiritual meeting to discuss the Holy Book. The people asked Ezra, the priest and scribe to read the law to them (Genesis, Exodus,

Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) after all affairs were settled. He explained to them what God wanted to tell them. Everyone listened attentively as though it was all new to them. Although they were Jews, they were ignorant of the law, which they neglected. They did not celebrate the feasts, nor offered sacrifices, nor kept the Sabbath....etc. When the Church serves the poor in the poor areas and talks to them about Christ, Glory be to Him, God who took our flesh, died and rose, you find that they do not know anything about it.



“So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah; and at his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the law; and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the

book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.” (Neh. 8:4-8)

Ezra, the scribe, stood on a wooden platform, the priests and Levites on his right and left.

The Church, till now, puts the Bible at a higher level than the people so that it remains above the heads of the people. The word of God is above all, we all stand when the Bible is read and we accept and obey all what God says.

Ezra Blessed the Great God:

Ezra started to read the law. When he first blessed God saying “blessed are You forever O God”, the people raised their hands and shouted “Amen, Amen”. They fell on their faces in front of God. They were spiritually zealous to go back to God, for they felt God’s blessings and hand in building the wall, and overcoming the enemy. They also felt God’s presence in having Nehemiah and Ezra with them. The Levites, with their spiritual knowledge, started to explain to them what was read. This is the role of the deacon to read and teach the people.

The people discovered that their lives were sinful, after the Law of Moses was read and explained to them in the light of God's commandments. They started to cry for their shortcomings and for having ignored God's commandments. They knew that this was the reason for the destruction of Jerusalem and their tribulation, so they were very sad indeed.



“And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep.’ For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’ So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.’ And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.” (Neh. 8:9-12)

This Day is Holy to the LORD your God; do not Mourn or Weep:

For your weeping might turn to despair, smallness of heart and reluctance due to severe sadness. Because you knew the wisdom of

God and discovered that you are sinners, this is a holy day for God, the day on which we start to repent and become holy by the grace of God and we truly change and offer genuine tears.

The happiness and hope of man lead him to be zealous, the opposite happens when he is sad and depressed. He becomes listless and unable to work; he blames himself instead of leaving the Holy Spirit to blame him. Surrendering to sadness is not constructive.

Do not be sorrowful, for the joy of the LORD is your Strength:

They asked the people to rejoice with God and eat because they had been fasting since morning. The people were also told not to forget the needy but to let them share the food with them.

We also must get closer to God more and more during the holy feasts, so that we may become truly spiritual. When we get nearer to Him, He gives us spiritual powers. This requires: reading the Bible, shedding tears of repentance for our sins and our shortcomings, remembering the needy, rejoicing in the grace of God, and the holy liturgy. If we stick to these, our life will change and we will feel that feasts are truly spiritual occasions.



“Now on the second day the heads of the fathers’ houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law. And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, ‘Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.’” (Neh. 8:13-15)

As a result of their happiness by the word of God, they gathered the next day asking for the explanation of the Law. They found that the Law spoke about the Jewish feasts that were mentioned in the book of Leviticus, which had been ignored for a long time when they were far away from God.

The Jews have three main feasts: The Passover (Easter), the Fiftieth feast (Pentecost) and the feast of the Booths.

The feast of the Booths: was celebrated for eight days and they discovered that it took place in the seventh month.

The Origin of the Feast of the Booths:

When the people of Israel went out into the desert and remained in it 40 years, God protected them by means of a cloud during the day and a column of fire at night. He protected them from their neighbours, from the danger of the desert, from hunger, from thirst and from snakes and scorpions. He sent them manna from heaven and water from a rock. He wanted to remind them of all that by making them live in booths or tents; during this feast, so that they may praise God who looked after them when they were strangers.

The idea of living in tents is persistent in the Holy book. Our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in spite of their extreme wealth, refused to live in houses but lived in tents till the end of their days. **“By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; For he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Hebrews 11: 9-10)**

We live in the tent of our body that is not stable, and there will come a day on which the tent will be undone and we will wait for a house made by the hand of God Himself. **“For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from**

God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

(2Corinth. 5:1)

They held the palm branches in the feast of the booths, they did the same on Palm Sunday, praising our LORD Jesus Christ, Glory be to Him, saying: “Hosanna in the highest.”



“Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness.” (Neh. 8:16-17)

Everyone obeyed the Law; they went out and made booths everywhere, in their houses, on top of the houses, in the outdoor halls and in the tabernacle. They remembered that they had not celebrated this feast for almost 1,000 years since Joshua son of Nun (1,400 BC) after which the period of Judges started. Paganism appeared interrupted by short periods of repentance, till the time of

King David when worshipping became regular. This was interrupted once again after the time of King Solomon when the people deviated from God, and captivity took place. The tabernacle was burnt down and all feasts were ignored during the time of Nehemiah.

There was very great gladness: Everyone was happy to celebrate this feast once again for its deep meaning and happy memories.



“Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner.” (Neh. 8:18)

With the return of the feast of the Booths, returned the spiritual ritual of the people gathering every day for one week to read the Book and praise God, without doing anything else from the first to the last day (the eighth day). This brought special joy. The people applied all that was written in the Book of Law.

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

- + *“And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, “Amen, Amen.” while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.” (Neh. 8:6)*
- + *“This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep.” (Neh.8:9)*
- + *“For this day is holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”(Neh. 8:10)*
- + *“Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God.”(Neh. 8:18)*

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Chapter Nine

Confessions of Sins

- + Separation from Foreigners.
- + The Levites Prayer.



“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in Sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.” (Neh.9:1-3)

After they performed all that was written in the Book of the Law, they fasted, wore sackcloth (rough material) and put dust on their heads, which was a sign of humility. They kept away from foreigners and confessed their sins.

In the old days, people used to confess in public but now people confess only in front of a priest who is God's representative on earth. Many people take the sacrament of confession lightly, some might not confess for years! We should draw from this a spiritual exercise by confessing regularly especially before feasts so that we can celebrate the feast in a spiritual manner and feel happy in God.

On that day the people read the Bible. They divided the spiritual day: first they read the Bible for one quarter of the day, and then praised God for another quarter, so the day was full of great spiritual work.

Most of us are very lazy in reading the Bible, reading the Agpeya and praising God.



“Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shabaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God. And the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said: ‘Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever. Blessed be Your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise!’” (Neh.9: 4-5)

The Levites recited some songs and praises and the people repeated after them. This represented the most beautiful praising in the Bible. Almost this entire chapter is praising God for all His work from the start of the history of Israel. The church included some of this praise in Apocalypses: “Praise Him and exalt Him above all forever.”



“You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, The heaven of heavens, with all their host, The earth and every thing on it, The seas and all that is in them, And You preserve them al. The host of heaven worships You.” (Neh. 9:6)

You alone are the LORD... You created heaven, earth and seas, then You created man who sinned but You repaired his image. They mentioned the story of the creation from the beginning to the end. You, created man and protected him forever, even the angels that we do not see, worship You O LORD.



“You are the LORD God, Who chose Abram, and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and gave him the name Abraham; You found his heart faithful before You, and made a covenant with him to give the land of Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, and the Girgashites-To give it to his descendants. You have performed Your words, for You are righteous.” (Neh. 9:7-8)

We notice here that neither Adam nor Noah are mentioned because the Jews honour Abraham and consider him the father of the forefathers. They do not relate themselves to Adam but always say “We are the children of Abraham” because Adam introduced sin into the world but Abraham is a symbol of faith acting in love.

“They answered and said to Him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham.” (John 8:39)

The Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites...etc were all strong Canaanites whose lands were taken by the Jews during the time of Joshua son of Nun.



“You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heard their cry by the Red Sea. You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants, And against all the people of his land. For You knew that they acted proudly against them. So You made a name for Yourself, as it is this day. And You divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their persecutors You threw into the deep, as a stone into the mighty waters. Moreover You led them by day with a cloudy pillar, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the road, which they should travel. You came down also on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments. You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, and commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, by the hand of Moses Your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, and brought them water out of the rock for their thirst, and told them to go in to possess the land which You had sworn to give them. (Neh. 9:9-15)

Your Holy Sabbath = the Commandment of the Sabbath.

He reminded them of the Saviour... God loved His people... He came to save them (the Incarnation), the Passover (Crucifixion and Resurrection), dividing the Red Sea (Baptism) drowned the Pharaoh and his army (destroying the devil). God guided them with a cloud

pillar and a pillar of fire (the sacraments of Myron and the Leadership of The Holy Spirit), talked to them (the voice of God in the Bible), gave them bread to satisfy their hunger (Communion), gave them water to quench their thirst (spiritual satisfaction), and told them to inherit the land (promise of eternal life).



“But they and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. But hardened their necks, and in their rebellion, they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them. Even when they made a molded calf for themselves, and said, ‘This is your god that brought you up out of Egypt,’ and worked great provocations, yet in Your manifold mercies, You did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of the cloud did not depart from them by day, to lead them on the road; nor the pillar of fire by night, to show them light, and the way they should go. You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold Your manna from their mouth, and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness; They lacked nothing; Their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell. Moreover You gave them kingdoms and nations, and divided them into districts. So they took possession of the land of Sihon, the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan. You also

multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and brought them into the land, which You had told their fathers to go in and possess. So the people went in and possessed the land; You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hands, with their kings and the people of the land, that they might do with them as they wished. And they took strong cities and a rich land, and possessed houses full of all goods, Cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and grew fat, and delighted themselves in Your great goodness. Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against You, cast Your law behind their backs and killed Your prophets, who testified against them to turn them to Yourself; And they worked great provocations. Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies, who oppressed them; And in the time of their trouble, when they cried to You, You heard from heaven; And according to Your abundant mercies You gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest, they again did evil before You. Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them; Yet when they returned and cried out to You, You heard from heaven; and many times You delivered them according to Your mercies, and testified against them, that You might bring them back to Your law. Yet they acted proudly, and did not heed Your commandments, but sinned against Your judgements, 'Which if a man does, he shall live by them.' And they shrugged their shoulders, stiffened their necks, and would not hear. Yet for many years You had patience with them, and testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless in Your great mercy, You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them, for You are God, gracious and merciful." (Neh. 9:16-31)

“But they and our fathers acted proudly hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments.”

This happened when they thought that Moses died on the mountain, so they made a golden calf, they rebelled and asked Aaron to lead them back to Egypt.

“But You are God, ready to Pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them.”

This is an answer to those who say that God was cruel and tough in the Old Testament. How can He be cruel when it is said here that He was ready to pardon, gracious and merciful. He is the same, yesterday, today and forever; He is the same Christ of the Old and New Testaments. Thus we say in the second hose “His mercy is forever”.

The whole story was told in this praise, in spite of their sins, their stubbornness, their rebellion, disobedience and their great insult to God by making the golden calf, ignorance of the Law of God, by killing the prophets, God with His great mercy did not leave them and continued to lead them and to light their way by a cloudy pillar

during the day and a pillar of fire by night. He gave them His spirit to teach them His way through Moses. He gave them food and water, even their clothes remained intact for forty years in the wilderness. He gave them land; they were fulfilled and were given saviours (Judges) like Gideon, Jephthah and Samson.

“And they shrugged their shoulders, stiffened their necks and would not hear”:

It is a kind of pride and stubbornness, as they did not want to listen to God. How many times they disobeyed God and He delivered them to the hands of their enemies (the period of captivity). Then, they screamed to God asking for his mercy and forgiveness.



“Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and awesome God, Who keeps covenant and mercy; Do not let all the trouble seem small before You that has come upon us, our kings and our princes, our priests and our prophets, our fathers and on all Your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day. However You are just in all that has befallen us; For You have dealt faithfully, but we have done wickedly. Neither our kings nor our princes, our priests nor our fathers, have kept Your law, nor heeded Your commandments and Your testimonies, with

which You testified against them. For they have not served You in their kingdom, or in the many good things that You gave them, or in the large and rich land which You set before them; Nor did they turn from their wicked works.” (Neh. 9:32-35)

Lord do not forget these difficult times, and consider them as a punishment for our sins and give us back the good times. The same principle that Nehemiah adopted, God You are always right and we deserve all You do to us but please have mercy on us and forgive us.



“Here we are, servants today! And the land that You gave to our fathers, to eat its fruit and its bounty, here we are, servants in it! And it yields much increase to the kings You have set over us, because of our sins; Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle at their pleasure; And we are in great distress.” (Neh. 9:36-37)

We were kings in our land, with You Lord, we were free and independent, but now we have become slaves in our land. This great misery suffices us - we will come back and build the wall and our houses, now we are listening to the law. They were trying to soften God's heart.

“And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.” (Neh. 9:38)

All people agreed to write a new covenant with God. It was the same covenant, which was with Moses and Joshua, renewed by repentance.

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

- + “You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them” (Neh. 9:17)
- + “You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them” (Neh. 9:20)
- + “You heard from heaven; And according to Your abundant mercies. You gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies.” (Neh. 9: 27)
- + “Nevertheless in Your great mercy, You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them; For You are God, gracious and merciful.” (Neh. 9:31)
- + “However You are just in all that has befallen us; For you have dealt faithfully, but we have done wickedly.” (Neh. 9:33)

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Chapter Ten

Renewal of the Covenant

- + **The Signatories of the Covenant.**
- + **Summary of the Covenant.**

From verses Number 1 to 27:

The ninth chapter ended with renewing the covenant with God as they came back to their old glory and their strong spirituality. This covenant had to be sealed by the priests, the Levites and the leaders of the people.



“Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding—these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our LORD, and His ordinances and His statutes.” (Neh. 10:28-29)

+ The Nethinim: is a Hebrew title (referring to all those who were consecrated) given to those who were designated by King David to serve the temple and the Levite priests (Ezra 8:20)

If you come back to God, you have to be different from the people of the world, you cannot be a Christian and remain similar to the children of the world, but you have to be different in your habits, manners, thoughts, principles, clothes and talk.

Everyone including women, boys and girls had a covenant with God, which was from the time of Moses.



“We should not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, not take their daughters for our sons; if the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and we would forego the seventh year’s produce and the exacting of every debt.” (Neh. 10: 30-31)

They were committed to the commandments of God, which He has repeated to them many times so that they do not mix with non-

believers and do not marry from them. Even now, we advise our children not to mix too much with non-believers, but to make it limited and under supervision, so as to avoid spiritual and social problems.

They also came back to respecting the Sabbath by not buying or selling from the people of the land “Pagans” on the Sabbath nor on any holy day.

One of the commandments was to come back to the law of the seventh year which means that every seventh year, they have to give the land a rest by not planting it and not to do any work, but to celebrate this year with God. Also if any one had unpaid debts in the seventh year and was unable to pay, his debts would be waived, this is symbolic of the spiritual blessing and forgiveness in the New Testament.



“Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God; for the showbread, for the regular grain

offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God. We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for bringing the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as it is written in the Law.” (Neh. 10:32-34)

We Made Ordinances for Ourselves, to Exact from Ourselves:

No one can change another unless this other is committed to change himself.

Signs of True Repentance:

- + Careful application of the commandment.
- + Commitment and zeal in spiritual exercises.

Their true repentance appeared in their dedication to give one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of God. This is what is written in the “Torah” that every tribe of the twelve tribes of Israel was responsible for one month of the year to offer firewood sacrifices and offerings to the Levites.



“And we made ordinances to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD; to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God;” (Neh. 35-36)

They used to bring the firstfruit of the trees, the firstborn of the sons and daughters and the firstborn of their herd and cattle to the house of God as a thanksgiving. This was called **the harvest feast**.



“to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, the new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities.” (Neh. 10:37)

In Joshua, we find that the Levites were distributed among many districts, so that they had the tithes of the tribes. They in turn, served the altar (the temple) and gave their tithing to God. Everyone

enjoyed the blessing of giving and obeying the commandment of tithing.



“And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms of the storehouse. For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary are, where the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers are; and we will not neglect the house of our God.” (Neh. 10:38-39)

The role of the priest here is to supervise the act of the Levites of giving their tithes to the house of God.

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

- + “We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons.” (Neh. 10:30)
- + “Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God.” (Neh. 10:32)

Chapter Eleven

The Inhabitants of Jerusalem

Most of the Jews lived outside Jerusalem. They wanted to inhabit Jerusalem and to increase their numbers, so they agreed to cast a lot to choose one out of ten of each tribe to live in Jerusalem. Some offered to live in Jerusalem, while others lived outside it. They looked at the destroyed and burnt city and did not want to live in it.

The spiritual symbol here is that, some people do not want to live in the Church to avoid the blame of their conscience and of the Holy Spirit. Those who remained in Jerusalem would have had to follow the rituals and all the spiritual duties.

Those names mentioned in the Holy Bible point to the names written in the book of life, as long as we live with God, we will end in heavenly Jerusalem.

The order in which these names are mentioned starting with the leaders, priests, Levites, the guards of the temple and the servants refers to the spiritual status of each group in heavenly Jerusalem.

* * * * *

Chapter Twelve

The New Jerusalem

- + **The Priests and Levites who returned from Captivity.**
- + **Dedication of the Wall of Jerusalem.**
- + **The Singers and the Temple's doors Guards.**

From verse Number 1 to 26:

The names of those who went to Jerusalem are mentioned till verse 26. After completing the building of the wall and after the return of the rituals and feasts, the wall had to be dedicated.



“Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps. And the sons of the singers gathered together from the countryside around Jerusalem, from the villages of the Netophathites, from the house of Gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth; for the singers had built themselves villages all around Jerusalem. Then the priests and Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, the gates, and the wall. So I

brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall, and appointed two large thanksgiving choirs. One went to the right hand on the wall toward the Refuse Gate. After them went Hoshaiah and half of the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, and some of the priests' sons with trumpets-Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Michaiiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, and his brethren, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. By the Fountain Gate, in front of them, they went up the stairs of the City of David, on the stairway of the wall, beyond the house of David, as far as the Water Gate eastward. The other thanksgiving choir went the opposite way, and I was behind them with half of the people on the wall, going past the Tower of the Ovens as far as the Broad Wall, and above the Gate of Ephraim, above the Old Gate, above the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate; and they stopped by the Gate of Prison. So the two thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God, likewise I and the half of the rulers with me; and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Minjamin, Michaiiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets, also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. The singers sang loudly with Jezrahiah the director.” (Neh. 12:27-42)

Here Nehemiah provided a beautiful ritual for dedicating the wall. All the Levites (singers and deacons) gathered from all districts surrounding Jerusalem, also the priests and the thanksgiving choirs. Nehemiah divided them to two groups:

The first group on one side of the wall consisted of the Levites, half the leaders of Judah and some of the names mentioned with Ezra, the scribe and priest.

The second group consisted of the priests and governors and some of the names mentioned with Nehemiah on the other side of the wall, though Nehemiah was not considered one of the priests and Levites.

They gathered around the wall singing. The two groups sang in turn as deacons do in the Church when one side sings quarter of the praise and the other side replies. The wall became a wall of prayer and praise.

The Musical Instruments of David the Man of God:

They adopted David's way and spirit in singing and praising as mentioned in Psalm 150: "Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; Praise Him with the lute and harp! Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes! Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!" All these instruments were used in praise and were called David's instruments.



“Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejected, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.” (Neh. 12:43)

They spent all day performing the dedication of the wall and offering sacrifices, the dedication needed blood as a symbol of sacrifice, which sanctifies man. This was a reference to Christ, Glory be to Him, He is our sacrifice, His blood is with us on the altar and we are sanctified by it.

Putting the blood of the animals sacrificed on the doors was not a Christian ritual and has no value now because we live by the blood of Christ and have faith in him, eat His body and drink His blood.

The Joy of Jerusalem was heard far off:

This reminds us of what happened on “Palm Sunday”. The voice of the Christians who shouted after Christ “Hosanna in the Highest” was very loud because of their joy.



“And at the same time some were appointed over the rooms of the storehouse for the offerings, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions specified by the Law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered.” (Neh. 12:44)

Nehemiah continued organising everything worship, storerooms, the tribes, the wall, the praise and the Levites. He established a system for everything and appointed leaders to follow up the work. He knew that time was short and that he might have to go back to Shushan to his old job as the king’s cupbearer any time, so he wanted everything to be organised even in his absence. This is a good quality in a wise servant who realises that he would go one day but the service would continue without him, so he distributes the work and he does not do everything by himself but rejoices in the successful service of others.



“Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their god and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son. For in the days of

David and Asaph of old there were chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.” (Neh. 12:45-46)

Nehemiah wanted to bring back the old praise from the time of David and the tabernacle before building the temple, which was built in the time of Solomon, so he organised continuous praises day and night.

“Moreover David and the captains of the army separated for the service some of the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals. And the number of the skilled men performing their service was: Of the sons of Asaph: Zaccur, Joseph, Nethaniah, and Asharelah; the sons of Asaph were under the direction of Asaph, who prophesied according to the order of the king. Of Jeduthun, the sons of Jeduthun: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiah, Shimei, Hashabiah, and Mattithiah, six, under the direction of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied with a harp to give thanks and to praise the LORD. Of Heman, the sons of Heman: Bukkiah, Mattaniah, Uzziel, Shebuel, Jerimoth, Hananiah, Hanani, Eliathah, Giddalti, Romamti-Ezer, Joshbekashah, Mallothi, Hothir, and Mahazioth. All these were sons of Heman the king’s seer in the words of God, to exalt his horn. For God

gave Heman fourteen sons and three daughters. All these were under the direction of their father for the music in the house of the LORD, with cymbals, stringed instruments, and harps, for the service of the house of God. Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were under the authority of the king.” (1 Chronicles 25:1-6)



“In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, a portion for each day. They also consecrated holy things for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated them for the children of Aaron.” (Neh. 12:47)

To consecrate is to offer holy things - they offered the sacrifice to the hands of the Levites. The Levites offered the sacrifice to the priests and the priests raised it because they were responsible for the consecration.

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

+ “Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.” (Neh. 12:43)

Chapter Thirteen

Nehemiah's Final Adjustments

- + **Isolating Foreigners.**
- + **Attending to the Needs of the Priests.**
- + **Keeping the Sabbath.**
- + **Condemning Marriage to Strangers.**



*“On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God”
(Neh. 13:1)*

In this last chapter of Nehemiah, many improvements took place. Whenever they read the Book of Moses, they found something new. This teaches us something very important; we read a lot, know a lot but do nothing. But these people were zealous, whenever they read a new commandment; they applied it in their lives, so they developed spiritually very quickly because of their obedience to the commandments of God.

Ammon and Moab are two troublesome personalities in the history of the Old Testament and the Jewish people. We remember Genesis 19: 30-38, when Lot left our father Abraham and went to Sodom and Gomorrah and in the end he left it, losing everything even his wife who became a pillar of salt. Sodom and Gomorrah were burnt. Lot's two daughters were brought up in a bad atmosphere learning bad unnatural sexual habits from the pagans in Sodom and Gomorrah. They committed a deadly sin when they made their father drunk and slept with him. One of them gave birth to Moab and the other to Ammon. So the children of Moab and Ammon became the symbol of evil because they came to the world by evil doing and pagan ways. There was always an enmity between the Jews on the one hand, and the Moabites and the Ammonites on the other. When the Jews deviated from God, they mixed with their neighbours and married from among them. They took the daughters of Moab and Ammon and did not lead a spiritual life.

After 400 years, God spoke to Moses and told him that the Ammonites and the Moabites were not to mix with the people of God forever.



“Because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.” (Neh. 13:2)

The children of Moab and Ammon were against the people of God, they tried to hinder their passage with Moses in Sinai.

The story of Balaam was mentioned in Numbers 22, 23 and 24. Balak, king of Moab was worried because of the large number of the people of Israel, so he sent to Balaam saying: **“therefore, please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”** (Number 22:6)

Balak sent for Balaam to come and curse the people, who were greater than him. He wanted to break them and drive them out of the land. Balaam refused at first because God said to him **“You shall**

not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.” (Numbers 22:12) Balak called him again, so God said to Balaam: “If the men come to call you, rise and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you – that you shall do.” (Numbers 22:20)

Balaam went but did not curse the people, he blessed them four times but in the end he advised the king of Moab to try and distract them from God by making them sin with pagan girls, then God will be angry with them. Balaam’s advice was very bad and showed corruption, and obscenity.



“So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.” (Neh. 13:3)

After they heard the Law, they separated foreigners from Israel.



“Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, was allied with Tobiah. And he had prepared for him a large room, where previously they had stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, the tithes of grain, the new wine and oil, which were commanded to be given to the Levites and singers and gatekeepers, and the offerings of the priests. But during all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes King of Babylon I had returned to the king. Then after certain days I obtained leave from the king, and I came to Jerusalem and discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room. Then I commanded them to cleanse the rooms; and I brought back into them the articles of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.” (Neh. 13:4-9)

Nehemiah organised everything and put everything in order. He went back to the king of Babylon Artaxerxes but his heart was in Jerusalem. After a while, he took the king’s permission to go back to Jerusalem once more to serve . Nehemiah might have been away for a few months, during which time Eliashib gave Tobiah the holy place where they kept the offerings, the frankincense, the articles of the house of God, to use as a storeroom for himself.

Tobiah the Ammonite official was one of the three evil men: Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammomite official, and Gesham the Arab.

This is the worst that anyone can do, to trade religious matters for material gain which cheapens holy matters in the eyes of the people and makes the temple lose its holiness and awe. When Nehemiah knew what happened, he was very angry and removed all the household goods of Tobiah from the storeroom of the house of God, cleansed it and returned the articles, the offerings and frankincense, as our LORD Jesus Christ did: “Then He went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in it, saying to them, **‘It is written, ‘My house is a house of prayer’, but you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’**” (Luke 19:45-46)



“I also realized that the portions for the Levites had not been given them; for each of the Levites and the singers who did the work had gone back to his field.” (Neh. 13: 10)

Although Nehemiah was absent for a short period, all the little foxes that were afraid of him tried to compromise the truth. They did not send the portions of the Levites which were given by the tribes to them, so the Levites had to go back to work in the fields. All that Nehemiah built in two years was threatened to be destroyed because of his absence. It shows that the presence of a strong leader is necessary for the work to continue.



“So I contended with the rulers, and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken?’ And I gathered them together and set them in their place. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouse Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah, and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and their task was to distribute to their brethren.” (Neh. 13:11-13)

Nehemiah blamed the leaders strongly, for neglecting the house of God and allowing it to be robbed after he had organised it all and kept it under control. He started re-organising everything starting by the tribe of Judah (his own tribe) so that no one would accuse him of

favouring one tribe to another. The tribe of Judah gave one tenth of everything to the Levites, and Nehemiah employed some men who were “considered faithful” to distribute the provisions to the Levites equally and fairly.



“Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its services!” (Neh. 13:14)

This was also said in the fifth chapter, verse 19.

This prayer comes from the heart of a humble servant asking God not to wipe out his good deeds. Anyone who offers a service to the house of God, no matter how small it is, it will be considered and will be rewarded by God. The work in the house of God needs many servants, **“The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few.” (Mathews 9:37)**



“In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading

donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions. Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath," (Neh. 13:15-18)

One of the last improvements that Nehemiah carried out was to bring back the dignity of the Sabbath according to the Law. Due to the lack of wine presses, the workers were treading on the grapes, collecting sheaves, loading donkeys, farming and selling on the Sabbath. Men of Tyre (who were not Jews) also took advantage of this to deal and profit on the Sabbath. Nehemiah confronted them and blamed those who were responsible, reminding them of how their fathers broke the Sabbath and invited God's wrath. They were repeating their fathers' mistake and they must face the consequences.

Keeping Sunday as a holy day for God is a very important commandment. Sunday remains a day for God, a day for the Mass Service, for having communion, reading the Bible and serving God.



“So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day. Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. Then I warned them, and said to them, ‘Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!’ From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!” (Neh. 13:19-22)

Nehemiah was firm and courageous. On Friday at sunset, he ordered the guards and the porters to shut all doors for 24 hours. On “Saturday”, no one was allowed to enter or go out, nor buy nor sell. Those who broke the Sabbath by buying and selling waited outside for 24 hours. This was repeated for one or two weeks but Nehemiah warned them that he would arrest them if they continued waiting by the doors on the Sabbath, so they obeyed. He commanded the Levites to guard the doors and to keep the Sabbath holy without buying and selling.

Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!

Nehemiah used to raise his heart to God before work and ask Him to remember him for keeping the Sabbath holy. He had a modest faithful heart and expressed repentance without pride or boasting.



“In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people.” (Neh. 13:23-24)

Ashdod : one of the towns of Palestine.

Ammonites : from Ammon

Moabites : from Moab

Nehemiah corrected something else: he found that some of the Jews married pagan women from “Ashdod, Ammon and Moab” and lived with them, and much worse than that was that they spoke with each other in the language of the gentiles and forgot the original Jewish language. Unfortunately, this is what happens today as many are

ignorant of the Coptic language and speak the language of the world and its style.



“So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin. Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?” (Neh. 13:25-27)

It is a great virtue in the eyes of God to be firm with the sin. As the Jews lived with people of the world, spoke their language, adopted their manners and habits, they lost their religion and the covenant between them and God. Nehemiah reminded them of Solomon, king of Israel, who was God’s beloved; there was no one like him. He was very spiritual, very wise and wrote the chapters of wisdom, but he committed the same sin towards the end of his life: he took pagan wives, who deviated his heart from worshipping God and he was

about to perish because of his sin, but God made him repent by the intercession of David, his father.



“And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I drove him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.” (Neh. 13:28-29)

There should be no flattery in truth, even in priesthood. When Nehemiah found that one of the children or grand children of Eliashib, the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanbaalat the Horonite, he dismissed him because he defiled priesthood.



“Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service and to bringing the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times. Remember me, O my God, for good!” (Neh. 13:30-31)

Nehemiah was an ordinary servant, he was not a priest or a chief priest but he loved God and his Church, and because of this deep love, he achieved what no one in his generation could achieve. If every one of us had Nehemiah's heart, we could correct many things and if we kept every word in the Holy Book, no matter what, the Church would be strong again and would have walls. Nehemiah, the spiritually zealous man of prayer, faithful, hard working, persevering never thought of his own good. We need such a spirit, so that the Church returns to its strength and beauty and becomes faultless.

“That He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.” (Ephesians 5:27)

Verses to Learn and Contemplate upon:

- + *“Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its services!” (Neh. 13:14)*
- + *“Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!” (Neh. 13:22)*
- + *“Remember me, O my God, for good!” (Neh. 13:31)*

*Glory be to God for ever,
Amen.*

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