When God Turns Cursing to Blessing
The Restoration of a Nation: The Book of Nehemiah

"However, our God turned the curse into a blessing." Nehemiah 13:2

Introduction

I would like to tell you a story about a nation in decline, and of their amazing revival and restoration. It is a story of a people facing enemies without and corruption within, discouraged and dispirited, lacking both direction and motivation. Above all, it is a story of how God raised up a unique man, a man of wealth and position, a man who was bold, blunt, and at times brutal. Only this kind of man could inspire the people to build the wall, revive the people, and secure the nation. It is a story of how corruption was exposed, and justice was restored. Stop me if you've heard this one:

The Book of Nehemiah is a parable of America today and is a metaphor of our lives.

1. Quoted from the late Mike Vanderboegh, Sipsey Street Irregulars:

   "This is no small thing, to restore a republic after it has fallen into corruption. I have studied history for years and I cannot recall it ever happening. It may be that our task is impossible. Yet, if we do not try then how will we know it can't be done? And if we do not try, it most certainly won't be done. The Founders' Republic, and the larger war for western civilization, will be lost.

   But I tell you this: We will not go gently into that bloody collectivist good night. Indeed, we will make with our defiance such a sound as all history from that day forward will be forced to note, even if they despise us in the writing of it."

2. What are the ingredients that make up a nation?
   a. Secure Borders
   b. Common Language
   c. Shared Culture
   d. Distinct Heritage
   e. Foundational Beliefs

   These five things must be undergirded by a recognition of the four divine institutions of: **volition, marriage, family, government**. These must be prioritized from the bottom up, not from the top down. Our Founding Fathers understood this!

   Each and every one of these building blocks have been under relentless attack by our own government and, in fact, by all the governments of Western civilization today.

3. Is today in America the day of the gray champion? **Read**: *"The Gray Champion"* (from Nathaniel Hawthorne's collection of short stories, *Twice Told Tales,* 1835) and *The Fourth Turning* (Strauss and Howe, 1997, pp. 139–140).

4. In the book of Nehemiah, we learn a timeless principle: There is **a work** to be finished, and **a war** to be fought. As surely as we enter into the work, we will be engaged in the warfare. Let us, therefore, learn to work with one hand, and to hold our spiritual weapons in the other.

5. In Nehemiah, God found a man who lived out the dictum: *"The just shall live by faith."* (Hab. 2:4)

God's Instruments

1. The foundations for any great work have been laid by many men and women of former generations. So it is with the work of Nehemiah in the building of the wall of Jerusalem.

2. God spoke through the **prophet Isaiah**, in the middle of the eighth century B.C., and declared, *"Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer … Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, 'You shall be built,' and to the temple, 'your foundation shall be laid.'"* (Isa. 44:28). This was about 150 years before Cyrus was born!

3. Then, **Jeremiah** (roughly 620 B.C.) revealed that the Babylonian captivity would last for seventy years (Jer. 25:11–12).

4. At the end of seventy years, **Daniel** (539 B.C.) began to pray for Israel's return (Dan. 9:1–19), and God revealed to him the prophecy of the seventy weeks (Dan. 9:20–27). The specific beginning of the seventy weeks was *"from the going forth of the command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem …"* (Dan. 9:25).

5. Shortly after **Cyrus** conquered Persia (He was half Mede, half Persian), he proclaimed: *"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!"* (2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:1–2).

6. God began the work of restoration with **Zerubbabel** (536 B.C.), a prince in the line of David. Then came Joshua, the high priest, of the lineage of Aaron. In the time of **King Ahasuerus** (520 B.C.), there was Mordecai, and queen Esther (more on them in Chapter 13), without whom the nation would have been destroyed. Then came **Ezra** (515 B.C.) the brilliant scribe and teacher, and the prophets **Haggai** and **Zechariah**. Finally, we come to **Nehemiah**, a common man with an uncommon calling and gifts.

7. During this time, God was at work not only among His people: He used Gentile rulers: Cyrus, Darius, Ahasuerus, and Artaxerxes.

8. The command to restore Jerusalem prophesied by Daniel is that given by Artaxerxes to Nehemiah, which occurred in 445 B.C.

Historical Chronology (Wiersbe, adapted)

1. 606–605 B.C. Babylon conquers Judah; first captives taken.

2. 587 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem; more captives taken.

3. 539 B.C. Babylon falls to Persians (Cyrus/Darius, Daniel 5).

4. 538 B.C. Cyrus' edict (Isa. 44:24-45:7; 2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–11). The first group of exiles return under Zerubbabel and Joshua (Neh. 12:1). The work on rebuilding the Temple begins.

5. 520 B.C. The rebuilding of the Temple is resumed after delay, by the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah (Hag. 1; Zech. 1:12–17).

6. 515–486 B.C. Temple completed; Esther becomes Queen (Esther).

7. 458 B.C. Ezra comes to Jerusalem in the second return group.

8. 445–444 B.C. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall.

Book Outline

I. Rebuilding the Wall, Chapters 1–6.
- A. The Work (Chapters 1–3).
- B. The Warfare (Chapters 4–6).

II. Reviving the People, Chapters 7–13.
- A. The Word (Chapters 7–10).
- B. The Walk (Chapters 11–13).

Principle: The physical/political **rebuilding** of the wall without the spiritual **revival** of the people can never secure the nation. The true restoration of any nation must begin in the minds and the hearts of the people and must have as its foundation the Word of God. **This is our great challenge in America today!**

I. Rebuilding the Wall (Chapters 1–6)

In this section, we will see how the will of God, the plan of God, and the work of God unite the sovereignty of God and the free will submission and service of men. The restoration of Judah and Jerusalem, like the rebuilding of any nation, involves both **a work** and **a warfare**.

A. The Work of Rebuilding (Chapters 1–3)

The work of God is the end product of those who receive the **revealed will of God**, discover **the personal plan of God**, and then engage others in the work of God.

CHAPTER 1—GOD FINDS HIS MAN

1:1–4 The Burden.

"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." Nehemiah 1:4

This verse links the report from Jerusalem (vv. 1–3) with the response of Nehemiah (vv. 5–11). The phrase *"The God of heaven"* is used some sixteen times in Ezra, and four in Nehemiah. It confirms the vision of Ezekiel, who saw the glory of the Lord depart from dwelling in the Temple (Ezek. 10:18–19; 11:22–23). This vision was also a preview of Jesus departure in John 7:53–8:1.

From the very beginning, the plan of God was to have man working with Him in dominion over the Earth (Gen. 1:26–28). Part of being made "in the image of God" was that just as God is sovereign over all things, man was given sovereignty over his realm. That sovereignty of necessity involves free will.

It is worth taking note that there is no Messianic hope seen in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, or Esther. Malachi, the last prophetic book, revives this hope.

The Report from Jerusalem.
This report came in the month Kislev, from the root *Kasal*, meaning "trust, hope." This is our month of Nov./Dec.—the time in which Hannukah is celebrated today. Nehemiah's brother along with others brought the report.

The Plight of Jerusalem.
Those in Jerusalem, both those who escaped from captivity, and those who had returned with Zerubbabel and Ezra, were in great distress:

1. They are **impoverished** = *"great distress."* They are impoverished and oppressed.
2. They are a **laughing-stock** = *"reproach."* The nations around them hold them in contempt.
3. They are **defenseless** = "broken down walls, burned gates." Walls and gates provide both identity as God's people and defense from enemies.

   In Ezra 4, resistance to the building of the Temple had caused the work to cease. When the Temple was finally completed, the old men wept to see its small size, compared to the Temple of Solomon (Ezra 3:12; Hag. 2:3).

1: 5–11 The Burden of Nehemiah.
The burden will always seem to be unbearable. This gives way to prayer to the One who gives sufficient strength for the task (1 Pet. 5:7), the prayer then leads to evaluating the work to be done, and the enlistment of others to aid in the task.

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6–7

That Nehemiah was a man of prayer is attested to by the fact that he prays repeatedly through this book. By his identification with the troubled Jews living in Jerusalem, his compassion, and his effective prayer, Nehemiah discovers the plan of God for himself. Though he holds a high position, and is no doubt wealthy and respected, yet he cannot ignore the plight of his countrymen. His mental process is as follows:

1. Identification—he puts himself in the place of his people.
2. Compassion—by his weeping, mourning, fasting and prayer, he enters into their sufferings.
3. Burden—It is not enough for him to feel their poverty and shame; he must do something about it.
4. Mission—he begins to plan how he can alleviate their sufferings.

Application: Have you found the niche in God's plan for yourself? If not, pray for **a need** to be revealed, **a burden** to be placed upon you, and **a door** to be opened for service in meeting that need. Just be sure to anticipate that while "God's will done God's way will not lack God's supply" (Hudson Taylor), it will also surely be met by the enemies' attack.

"For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries." 1 Corinthians 16:9.

The Doctrine of Effective Prayer

1. *"The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"* (James 5:16).
   a. A more literal translation: "Great power has a petition of a righteous man (when) being made effective" (*energeo*: present, middle, participle). The logical question is: What makes our prayers effective?
   b. The first requirement is that the praying man or woman qualifies as righteous. This implies first that they are a believer in Jesus Christ and, secondly, that they are in good standing with God.
   c. It must be understood that it is God, not man, that makes prayers effective. We simply have to be a sanctified vessel (1 Thess. 4:3).

2. "Good standing with God" means that we are in fellowship with Him, with no unconfessed sin, and that we are being obedient to His Word (James 5:16a; 1 John 1:9; 3:22–24).

3. When we are in fellowship with God (1 John 1:7), the indwelling Spirit is the one who "energizes" our prayers (Rom. 8:26–27; Eph. 5:18).

4. To be effective and powerful we must pray according to the will of God (1 John 5:14–15). Note that in Nehemiah's prayer, he prays God's promises back to Him (Neh. 1:9–10).

5. Prayer is not more effective because we pray for long periods of time. Most of the prayers in the Bible are brief (Matt. 6:5; 23:14; 1 Kings 18:36–37; 1 Chron. 4:10; Isa. 38:2–3; Luke 18:13; 23:42; Acts7:20).

6. We should learn to follow the model prayer of Jesus in Matthew 6:9–15. Look at the elements that make up that model prayer. Of special notice is that it is inclusive—not "me, my" but "us, our."

7. Finally, we must pray in faith, knowing that God hears us, and that He will answer in His time and His way (Matt. 21:22; Mark 11:24).

The Sovereign Will of God

What Nehemiah discovers by this report creates in his soul a desire for what God had already declared to be His will.

> *"Those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell in."* Isaiah 58:12

> *"On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David which has fallen down, and repair its damages*; *I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; and they shall possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the* LORD *who does this thing."* Amos 9:11–12

Principle: The **will of God** is revealed in the Word of **God**. This will is general, or universal, in scope.

1. It was the will of God for Christ to die for all men (John 3:16; Rom. 3:22–23; 2 Cor. 5:15; 1 Tim. 2:6; 1 John 2:1–2).

2. It is the will of God that all men be saved (1 Tim. 2:3–6; 2 Pet. 3:9).

3. It is God's will that all who believe be sanctified (1 Thess. 4:3).

4. It is the will of God that all believers be filled and walk by the power of His Spirit (Gal. 5:16; Eph. 5:18).

5. It is God's will that we who believe learn to be thankful and content in all things (Phil. 4:11–13; 1 Thess. 5:18).

6. It is God's will that all suffering in our lives bring growth and blessing (James 1:1–12; 1 Pet. 1:6–9; 3:13–17; 4:12–19).

7. It is God's will that every believer be engaged in some form of spiritual service (Matt. 25:15; Mark 13:34; John 15:1–10; Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Cor. 12:4–7; 2 Cor. 5:14–21).

1: 5–11 <u>The Personal Plan of God</u>.
The personal plan of God will always fit within the revealed will of God. If we do what God has revealed to be His will through His Word, He will guide us to discover His personal plan for us. Have you ever asked the question: *"Lord, what do you want me to do?"* (Acts 9:6)

Once we submit to the revealed will of God, the personal plan of God always involves three crucial things:

1. His **operational** will—**what** does He want me to do?
2. His **geographical** will—**where** does He want me to be?
3. His **motivational** will—**why** does He want me to do it?

<u>Point</u>: The right thing in the wrong place is wrong. Doing the right thing, in the right place, with the wrong motive is wrong! When Paul says,

> *"And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them…"*
> Galatians 6:16

He uses the word *stoicheo* for *"walk."* It is a military term, that means to "walk in ranks, to stay in formation." The *"rule"* refers to *"a new creation"* (v. 15) in Christ. We are only "in step" with Him when, guided by His Spirit, we are in the right place, doing the right thing, for the right reason.

The plan of God for Nehemiah is revealed in his effective prayer:

1. First, he prepares his soul for service (v. 4).

2. Next, he offers praise to God for His character/essence (v. 5).

3. He appeals for God's mercy by confession of sins (vv. 6–7).

4. He prays back to God His former promises (vv. 8–9; Lev. 6:33; Deut. 30:2–5). These quotes introduce the concept later amplified by Jeremiah in his parable of the Potter and the clay (Jer. 18:1–11). This also introduces one of the most important words in the entire Bible: **"If"** (Isa. 1:18–20; Rom. 8:12–17; Col. 1:21–23; Heb. 3:7–15).

5. He requests God's favor to be shown through King Artaxerxes (vv. 10–11).

6. Nehemiah's burden for the remnant in Jerusalem is a picture of Jesus' compassion on the multitudes (Matt. 9:35–38).

<u>Principle</u>: If you compare this prayer with the prayer the Lord taught the disciples (Matt. 6:9–13), you will see some amazing parallels.

Note: As the king's cupbearer (1:11b) Nehemiah held a very high and honorable position, which speaks volumes about his character, and the trust the king had in him. Cupbearers often became confidants and advisors!

Prayer

1. **David** emphasized the importance of early morning prayer (Psalm 5:3; 57:8; 119:147).

2. **Paul** stressed the importance of praying "day and night" (1 Thess. 3:10; 5:17; 1 Tim. 5:5).

3. **Jesus** taught the crucial elements of prayer (Matt. 5:9–15). The more you study this model prayer, the more you will see how to pray effectively.

CHAPTER 2—PROVIDENTIAL PERMISSION AND PROVISION

"And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me."
Nehemiah 2:8b

Nehemiah sees the **providence of God** at work through his appeal and the king's benevolent supply.

The month of Nisan is the month of Passover, of Redemption. It has been four months since Nehemiah received the report about Jerusalem. During this time, he has been praying "*day and night*" (1:6). To appear before the king with a gloomy countenance could result in the death penalty!

Yet, God heard his prayer (1:11; 2:4) and gave him favor in the king's eyes. He had already plotted his course of action: He considered the length of his journey, the need for letters of introduction, and for permission to harvest wood from the king's forest (2:6–8). By this, Nehemiah discerned *"the good hand of my God upon me."* (2:8). In these verses we see the evidence of God's plan for Nehemiah confirmed:

1. Divine timing—the king's observation and question (vv. 1–2),
2. Divine favor—the king's approval of his plans (vv. 2–6), and
3. Divine provision—the king's supply of building materials (vv. 7–8).

Principle: Any ministry worth doing is worth being well-planned. Never assume that divine guidance takes the place of diligent planning.

The Providence of God (The Potter)

"The king granted them to me according to the good hand of God upon me." (2:8)

1. The Doctrine of Divine Providence is clearly seen in Abraham's response to Isaac on Mount Moriah, *"My son, God will* **provide** *for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering ... And Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, 'In the Mount of the Lord it shall be provided'"* (Gen. 22:8, 14). This is the very Mount where, two thousand years later, Jesus, the Lamb of God, was crucified for us.

2. John Wesley was vexed that so few people, especially pastors, understood the doctrine of the providence of God. "Among the foremost classic Christian doctrines there is scarce any that is so little regarded and perhaps so little understood, as (the) providence (of God)."

3. In all the writings of the Founding Fathers there is no other term so often repeated as the providence of God.

4. Providence speaks of the execution of God's plans and purposes in history. This providence works together with those in submission to God, and triumphs over all attempts of Satan and God's enemies to oppose it (Book of Job and Ecclesiastes).

5. The providence of God implies every area of divine essence: Sovereignty, Righteousness, Justice, Love, Eternal Life, Omniscience, Omnipotence, Omnipresence, Immutability, Veracity (a great acronym to memorize: "**S**top and **R**emember **J**esus **L**ove, so that **E**very **O**bstacle will become an **O**pportunity to press **O**n **I**n **V**ictory" – Gary Horton).

6. The providence of God embraces all that occurs, from world events to the fall of the sparrow and the numbering of the hairs on our head (Luke 12:6–7).

7. Only the providence of God can explain what Paul affirms in Romans 8:28.

8. In the book of Nehemiah, as in the book of Esther, the providence of God is the major truth behind the story.

9. The providence of God is displayed in history, prophecy, and personal experience (Deut. 30:1–10; Dan. 2:31–45; 7:1–28; 9:24–27; Matt. 23:37–25:46; Acts. 15:13–18; Romans 9–11; 2 Thess. 2:1–12; Rev. 2:1–22:21).

10. The revelation of Jeremiah 18:1–11 depicts God as the Master Potter, who can take the vessel marred in His hands, and remake it into another vessel that is useful to His purpose (Rom. 9:19–26). The providence of God works at all times to lift up the humble and to debase the proud (Isa. 40:3–4; James 4:4, 10; 1 Pet. 5:5–6).

11. The critical word for mankind in relation to the providence of God is the little word **"If"** (Isa. 1:19–20; Jer. 18:8–10; Rom. 8:12–17; 10:9; 11:6; Col. 1:21–23; Heb. 3:7–15).

2:9–10 <u>Preview of enemy opposition</u>.
We will see much more about this resistance in chapters 4–6. The implementation of God's plan always disturbs the kingdom of the devil. **Sanballat** is a Moabite, **Tobiah** an Ammonite (see 13:1–3). They will later be joined by **Geshem**, the Arab (2:19).

2:11–16 <u>The Reconnaissance</u>.
Knowing there would be opposition arising (he would have known the incidents of Ezra 4), Nehemiah keeps his plans secret. His reconnaissance is essential to the developing of his plans. In the same way, Jesus entered the Temple, developed His plan, and returned to drive the money changers out of His Father's house (Mark 11:11, 15–19).

2:17–18 <u>The Recruitment</u>.
Nehemiah as a good leader now enlists others in the work. *"They set their hands to this good work ..."* (v. 18b).

The marks of a good leader are:

1. He must know where he is going (ultimate goal or destination).
2. He must know how he intends to get there (intermediate means).
3. He must be able to inspire others to join his cause (character and conduct).

2:19–20 <u>The Resistance</u>.
Here, we have the unholy trinity arrayed against Nehemiah and the people of God. Sanballat is a Moabite, Tobiah is an Ammonite, and Geshem is an Arab (Ishmaelite). While the motives of their opposition are obvious, *"they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel."* We will see much more is involved when we get to Chapter 13, where we see God's eternal plan, the history of Israel, and the story of Esther come together.

<u>CHAPTER 3—THE WORK, THE WALL, AND THE GATES</u>

"Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord." Nehemiah 3:5

The phrase *"Next to them"* is repeated throughout the chapter and shows the unity of those who did the work. It also records with shame the failure of the nobles of Tekoa to enter into the work. Their failure stands in the biblical record forever and should be a warning to each of us that our lives will also be on record. Tekoa was about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. It was a dwelling place of shepherds, wise women (2 Samuel 14), prophets (Amos 1:1), and heroes (2 Sam. 23:26).

The prophet Isaiah saw the future millennial beauty of the walls and gates of Jerusalem. Surely that beauty will reflect the faithful work of Nehemiah and the others who labored against great odds.

"You shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise." Isaiah 60:18b

The Doctrine of Calling

"Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure" 2 Peter1:10

1. The **call** refers to the invitation of God. The **election** is based on the response to the call (Matt. 22:1–14). The Doctrine of Election is so simple that God *"*[has] *hidden these things from the wise and prudent and* [has] *revealed them unto babes"* (Matt. 11:25). The issue in the context is election!

2. There are two calls of God; the first is to **salvation** by faith, the second is to **service** through work (Matt. 11:28–30). The above verse, based on the context, refers to the call to service.

3. Once the call to salvation has been answered by faith, we receive the call to work, by the combination of our spiritual gift and our spiritual growth (1 Cor. 12:7–12; Heb. 5:12–14; 2 Pet. 1:5–11).

4. While the revealed will of God is universal, the plan of God works out personally and individually: *"to each according to his ability"* (Matt. 25:15), and *"to each his own work"* (Mark 13:34).

5. Every believer has a spiritual gift, a **vocation** in the plan of God, and promised eternal reward for doing it (2 Pet. 1:10–1; Psalm 129:11; 58:11; Mark 9:41; 1 Cor. 3:8; Rev. 22:12).

Three Great Truths from Chapter 3

1. The work of God is a team effort. The most repeated phrase, is, *"and next to him."* This is the principle of the *"body"* Paul elucidates in 1 Corinthians 12.

2. The work of God takes all kinds of people: priests, leaders, merchants and craftsmen, men and women, fathers and daughters, slaves and free. Some had homes, one only had a small dwelling or rented room.

3. While some *"Had a mind to work"* (4:6), some thought they were too privileged to bother (3:5).

The Gospel in the Gates

1. **The Sheep Gate** (3:1, 32). This is the gate the offerings for the Temple came through. This gate speaks of Christ as *"The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29). Note that only this gate was consecrated by the priests.

2. **The Fish Gate** (3:3). Through this gate the fishermen brought their catch to sell. This gate speaks to those who have believed, to become fishers of men (Matt. 4:18–19).

3. **The Old Gate** (3:6). This gate reminds us to walk in the old and good ways of the Lord (Jer. 6:16; John 14:6). God's way is not modern, it is ancient.

4. **The Valley Gate** (3:13). This reminds us of the importance of humility (Isa. 66:2; James 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:5–6).

5. **The Refuse (Dung) Gate** (3:13). This is the gate that all waste and rubbish was taken through. It reminds us of the need for daily cleansing (2 Cor. 7:1; 10:3–5; Eph. 4:17–19; 1 John 1:9). Cleansing and growth are the way to maturity and sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3).

6. **The Fountain Gate** (3:15). This reminds us of the *"living water"* of the Holy Spirit in and through our lives (John 4:14; 7:38–39). The in-filling of the Spirit follows confession and cleansing (Eph. 5:18).

7. **The Water Gate** (3:26). This gate speaks of the water of the Word of God (John 3:5; Eph. 5:25-26). In Chapter 8, Ezra will read the Word of God to the people gathered before this gate. It is worth seeing that **this gate required no repairs!**

8. **The Horse Gate** (3:28). The horse in Scripture is used as a symbol of warfare (Job 39:19–25; Isa. 5:28; Zech. 1:8; Rev. 6:1–8; 19:11–16). As we will see in chapters 4–6, the devil and his agents will always attack the work of God. This is why we need supernatural weapons and armor (2 Cor. 10:3–6; Eph. 6:10–18).

9. **The East Gate** (3:29). This is the gate of the Morning Star and the Sunrising (Mal. 4:2; 2 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 22:16). This is the gate through which Jesus Christ will enter Jerusalem at His coming.

10. **The Miphkad Gate** (3:31). The word *miphkad* is a military term which spoke of a military review of the troops. It carries the idea of an appointment for judgment. This reminds us that we will all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10–15; 2 Cor. 5:10).

This leads us right back to the Sheep Gate, reminding us that in the plan of God, everything begins and ends with the Lord Jesus Christ—first as Savior, and finally as Judge.

In 2:19–20, we have the second stage of enemy opposition (see 2:10), as they imply treasonous motives to Nehemiah and the builders. The wise Nehemiah does not waste time arguing with them or attempting to vindicate his motives. He boldly lays the case before ***"The God of heaven."*** This designation, used in Ezra and Nehemiah, is a reminder that God no longer dwells among His people. The vision of Ezekiel had been fulfilled (Ezek. 10:4, 18–19; 11:22–23), the glory of the Lord had departed from among them. Later, this very vision would be fulfilled in a much more terrifying way, when the Lord Jesus went out of the Temple, and climbed the Mount of Olives (John 7:37–8:1; 12:37–50).

B. <u>The Warfare of Rebuilding</u> (Chapters 4–6)

In these three chapters we have an extended section dealing with the opposition of Israel's enemies, which has already been indicated in 2:10 and 19. We will look at these chapters

briefly based on each attack and Nehemiah's response. In all, we will see seven attacks against the work, and Nehemiah's skillful defense to each one. They involve attacks from the enemies without, enemies within and, finally, the enemies combined. **This is the current state of America today.**

CHAPTER 4—ATTACK FROM WITHOUT

"And all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion. Nevertheless, we made our prayer to God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night." Nehemiah 4:8–9

If we want to do the work, we must prepare for the warfare. The unholy trinity we met in 2:19 now intensifies their evil opposition. How wonderfully Nehemiah and his team illustrate Jesus' admonition to his disciples in the Garden, *"Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Matt. 26:41).

4:1–6 Mockery, Scorn and Contempt.
This is not only **Sanballat** and **Tobiah**, but also *"the army of Samaria"* (v. 2). The charge is that they are building with *"heaps of rubbish"*, and that even such a light-footed creature as a fox could cause it to tumble down. Nehemiah responds with prayer, and renewed efforts. The wall was built to half its height because *"the people had a mind to work"* (v. 6).

4:7–10 Conspiracy to Disrupt, Create Chaos.
Once again Nehemiah says, *"we made our prayer to God,"* but this time adds, *"we set a watch against them day and night"* (v. 9). How true it is that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" (attributed to Thomas Jefferson, or Edmund Burke, or John Curran). In addition to the external threat, *"the strength of the laborers is failing"* (v. 10).

4:11–23 Threat of Murder, Slaughter.
This is the use of maximum fear to create doubt and debilitate the workers. In addition, Jews living among the enemies join in the chorus (v. 12); like the fake-news media, they repeat the threat ten times! Nehemiah refuses to be intimidated! He now arms, or calls to arms, all the people, *"with their swords, their spears, and their bows"* (v. 13). Where did he learn this tactic? Very possibly from the decree of Esther (Est. 8:8–17). Then he gives them a **battle cry** (v. 14)! Though the enemy lost heart (v. 15) they continued to work with one hand and carry a weapon in the other.

The Doctrine of Watching

1. Jesus urges us to be daily vigilant regarding our spiritual life (Matt. 25:15; Luke 12:37).

2. As children of the day, we are to be awake and vigilant (1 Thess 5:5–6).

3. The lack of spiritual vigilance will cost eternal reward, but vigilance will be richly rewarded (Rev. 3:11; 16:15).

4. Spiritual vigilance is linked with effective prayer (Matt. 26:41; Col. 4:2).

5. Spiritual vigilance is a mark of spiritual maturity (1 Cor. 16:13). It is a reflection of the ancient watchman on the wall (Psalm 127:1; Jer. 31:6–7; 1 Pet. 5:8–9).

CHAPTER 5—ATTACK FROM WITHIN

"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?'" Nehemiah 5:9

When the enemy from without fails, always expect the enemy from within. The devil sews division and discord to create internal strife. The result is discouragement and depression. Nehemiah had the courage to confront, rebuke, and correct the carnal conduct of the rich and powerful.

5:1–5 Greed and Selfishness.
Here, we have the rich and powerful taking advantage of the poor and the weak. Many could not even buy food for their families because they had either borrowed from or mortgaged to the wealthy. Some had sold their sons and daughters into slavery, so as to have food.

These practices were strictly forbidden in Exodus 22:22–27. They were not to take interest from each other, and every seventh-year slaves were to be set free (Exod. 21:2–6; Deut.15:12–18).

We see the same problem cropping up again in the early church (Acts 6:1-4), and Paul warns continually of the dangers of division (1 Cor. 1:10–17; 6:1–11; Phil. 1:27–28; Gal. 5:15; James3:16).

5:6–13 Nehemiah's Rebuke.
Nehemiah was outraged by the selfish conduct of these rich nobles. While they were enslaving their own neighbors, Nehemiah and others were liberating those who were enslaved by the nations (v. 8). Even the priests were guilty of these practices (v. 12), and Nehemiah did not spare them his wrath. He made them all take a vow to restore all they had taken and symbolically added the threat of divine dispossession if they failed (v. 13).

5:14–19 Nehemiah's Example.
Going above and beyond the call of duty, Nehemiah set an example of self-denial and self-sacrifice, by refusing the rightful provisions due him as governor, *"because of the fear of God"* (v. 15). When have you ever seen a politician who served the people without any compensation? Oh, wait! Isn't that happening in our country right now?

The list of provisions required to care for Nehemiah's staff and the slaves he had redeemed with his own money (vv. 17–18) were not drawn from the supply for the governor but were supplied from his own funds. Thus, he prays, *"Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people"* (v. 19). The evidence that God has indeed memorialized him is the very record of Scripture we are studying!

CHAPTER 6—COMBINED ATTACK FROM WITHOUT AND WITHIN

"And I said, 'Should such a man as I flee?' ... Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all ... because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him." Nehemiah 6:11–12

Nehemiah had overcome attacks both from without and within. Now he has to deal with the far more sinister attack from both forces combined. The enemies from without have united with the enemies from within.

6:1–4 The Ploy of False Friendship.
The motto of evil doers is often, "If you can't beat them, join them." They so often seek to draw us into "negotiations." Nehemiah discerns the evil intent behind their ploy. He will not cease the work because of fruitless discussions.

6:5–9 The "Unnamed Sources" Gambit.
Here, we have the tool of the "fake news media." They say, "sources have reported," or "we have it on good authority," but never divulge the sources. There are two reasons for this: first, the sources are traitors planted for this purpose, and second, the media make up the story and only try to give it credibility by quoting "unnamed sources." The motives they impute to Nehemiah are actually projection, revealing what they would do in his place. Take note of the desired progression of these enemies in verses 8–9. They invent accusations first to cause fear; the fear will create weakness, with the result that the work will not be done. When people charge you with false accusations, ignore them and keep on working!

6:10–14 The Hireling Prophet Scheme.
One of the most dangerous tactics of the devil is the use of the hireling prophet. Here, Shemaiah, who has the front of a prophet, is actually a secret informer, or a spy for the opposition. Using the fear of an assassination attempt, he tries to get Nehemiah to hide and cower (sound familiar?).

It is worth highlighting that Nehemiah's spiritual perception of this guise was not given until after he courageously refused to be intimidated, *"Should such a man as I flee? ... Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all"* (vv. 11–12). Shemaiah was nothing but a two-bit hireling, for sale to the highest bidder and, therefore, a coward at heart (John 10:12). And he is not the only one! There is *"the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who would have made me afraid"* (v. 14). The man or woman of God often has to stand against "the majority," who all will claim that the very fact that you are standing alone should prove that you are in the wrong. Ignore them!

Nehemiah simply commits them into God's hand for just recompense for their evil.

The Doctrine of Discernment

1. Spiritual perception, called discernment, is possible only to the soul saturated with the Scriptures, and under the guidance of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14; Heb. 5:14).

2. We ought to pray for spiritual discernment so as to escape the wiles of the devil (1 Kings 3:9).

3. Discernment is the spiritual capacity to distinguish between good and evil (Isa. 7:14; Heb. 5:14). The reason this is so difficult is that evil always disguises itself as good.

4. The Lord Jesus manifested, throughout His earthly life, the discernment and insight that is available to us all (Isa. 11:3; Luke 5:22).

5. Our perception is sharpened when we are able to relate the Word of God to events going on around us (2 Sam. 5:12; 2 Kings 4:9; John 4:19; Acts 10:34).

6:15–19 <u>The Wall Completed</u>.
In fifty-two days, working during the hottest time of the year, and with constant attack and subterfuge, Nehemiah and his team have accomplished what in the beginning would have seemed impossible. Even the enemies *"perceived that this work was done by our God"* (v. 16).

I am sure once the wall was built, many gave a sigh of relief and thought that the battles were over. Never let down your guard: that is the very moment you are most vulnerable. We find that *"Many of the nobles in Judah were pledged to him"* (v. 18), that is, Tobiah. We will meet this disgusting and evil man again.

II. <u>Reviving the People</u> (Chapters 7–13)

Following the rebuilding of the wall came the work of reviving the people. Any genuine spiritual revival of a nation implies that a spiritual decline has taken place. The people have lost their way, and as a result their lifestyle, their walk, has become corrupted. In order for their walk to be restored, the way must first be revealed again. This is found only in the Word of God.

"And though the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, Yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore, but your eyes shall see your teachers. Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it.'" Isaiah 30:20–21

Here, we see that God's solution for a nation adrift and under divine discipline is 1) the restoration of sound teaching, 2) the revelation of the way of truth and 3) the resultant faith-walk in the way revealed. This is exactly what we will see in this section of Nehemiah.

<u>Chapter 7—Organization and Administration</u>

"I gave 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." Nehemiah 7:2

As Nehemiah was returning to Shushan, he needed to establish some order to provide stability while he was away. First, he delegated authority to his brother Hanani, and also to Hananiah,

who *"was a faithful man and feared God more than many"* (v. 2). This would be a shared governorship.

He then gave instruction regarding the opening and closing of the gates of the city, for security purposes (v. 3). This also included the posting of citizen guards, who would act as watchmen.

God had put into his heart to do a census and establish a registry of the people (v. 4–5). This required a review of the old registry of those who had returned with Zerubbabel. The roster of those who returned to Jerusalem is essentially the same as that of Ezra 2. However, the chapter concludes with all the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, etc. settled in their cities.

Doctrine of Divine Guidance

1. Nehemiah relied on the guidance of God for his leadership skills (Neh. 2:12; 7:5).

2. For us today, the guidance of God begins with the Spirit of God using the Word of God (John 16:13).

3. The Spirit of God often speaks within the believer's spirit by His still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12; Isa. 30:21).

4. Humility of soul is essential if we are to know the guiding hand of God (Psalm 25:9; 32:8–9).

5. God leads us when we are obedient to what we already know to be His will (Gen. 24:27).

6. Often God will use the counsel of other faithful believers to guide us (Prov. 15:22).

A. The Word Revealed (Chapters 7–10)

In these chapters, Ezra and the people have a Bible Conference. It began with the reading and teaching of God's Word. This led to obedience by the people, and ultimately to confession and a reaffirmation to the covenant of Moses. Only the Word of God can reveal the Way of God, which leads to the Walk of God in the Spirit.

CHAPTER 8—RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF GOD

"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." Nehemiah 8:1

This is a fascinating verse. We see first of all that there is a unity of purpose in the people themselves. This principle is outlined by Paul for the Church in Ephesians 4:1–6. Secondly, they gather before the Water Gate, which is itself a picture of the Word of God. We will see much

more on this parallel in vv. 13–18. Finally, we are introduced to *"Ezra the scribe,"* who in the next verse is called *"Ezra the priest."*

If we go back to Ezra Chapter 7, we learn much more about this fascinating man. His lineage led all the way back to Aaron, the first high priest (Ezra 7:1–5). He led the second return to Jerusalem from Babylon after Zerubbabel and was *"a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses"* (Ezra 7:6). He had made a personal commitment, recorded in Ezra 7:10.

"For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10).

What character it shows that between learning the Law and teaching it, Ezra was determined to practice it in his own life. Ezra is an Old Testament example of what Paul exhorted Timothy to be:

"Be diligent [study] *to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Tim. 2:15).

That Ezra was spiritually successful in his pursuit of truth is seen in that he was called, *"Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of His statutes to Israel"* (Ezra 7:11). He was also recognized by King Artaxerxes for his *"God-given wisdom"* (Ezra 7:25).

8:1–12 <u>The Word of God Read and Interpreted</u>.
This Bible conference led by Ezra lasted for over a week! This is the first mention we have of a platform being made, and of the actual teaching method they used. Remember that the Law of Moses was written in Hebrew, but the language of Babylon was Aramaic (Chaldean). Therefore, Ezra first prayed, then the Scripture was read, translated, explained, and applied to the current needs of the people.

The convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit brought the people to tears (v. 9), but they were urged instead to rejoice, to feast, and to share with the poor, because *"The joy of the LORD is your strength"* (v. 10). As we learn in the book of Ecclesiastes, *"There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance"* (Eccl. 3:4). The time for fasting, mourning, and confession would soon come (Chapter 9).

8:13–18 <u>The Word of God Obeyed</u>.
On the second day (God's perfect timing), they heard the command concerning the feast of tabernacles (Lev. 23:33–4), which time was upon them. This feast was a reminder of Israel's wilderness wanderings and stood as both a lesson and a warning. The lesson is that we are pilgrims and strangers on this Earth (Heb. 11:8–10, 13–16). The warning is that we beware of the sin of unbelief that led to the 40 years of wilderness wandering (Numbers 14; Heb. 3:7–15).

So, the people obeyed, and made booths, and sat in them. This feast had not been celebrated since the days of Joshua (v. 17)! Each day they listened to the reading and teaching of the Word of God. On the eighth day, they held a sacred assembly. Why is this important?

The Great Day

"On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."
John 7:37–39

They are gathered before the Water Gate, listening to the Word of God. Remember that Nehemiah's commission from Artaxerxes was the beginning of the prophetic clock of Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks (Dan. 9:25). These believers are celebrating this feast for the first time since Joshua, and the next mention of the feast is when the greater Joshua/Jesus gave a ringing invitation to the multitudes (some estimate one and a half million). It was an invitation to enter into the true spirit of the feast, by believing in Him and becoming a true pilgrim on this Earth. The promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit was something far greater than the Shekinah presence that led Israel through the wilderness. It was the personal presence of God within, that would never depart.

The Doctrine of Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

1. **To Cut in Two.** The phrase *"rightly dividing"* in 2 Timothy 2:15 is from *orthotomeo*, which means "to cut a straight line."

2. **Two Covenants.** To begin with, we need to recognize that line divides two testaments and two covenants, the old and the new. The old covenant is conditional, incorporating the words "If you do ... then I will." The new covenant is unconditional, totally dependent on the faithfulness of God.

3. **Two Needs.** This leads to the division of law versus grace. To quote C. I. Scofield, "The Law utterly condemns the best of men; while grace freely justifies the worst of men." The Law cannot save anyone, but God's grace through Jesus Christ can save anyone. Until men realize they are under condemnation they will not see the need for eternal salvation.

4. **Two Separate People.** These two covenants are made between God and two separate entities—Israel and the Church. To mingle either the covenants or the entities to whom they pertain is to become hopelessly confused about the plan of God.

5. **Two Judgments.** There are two major judgments for sin: The cross and the Great White Throne. On the cross, Jesus Christ died for all the sins of all mankind. God judged those sins in Christ, so that all who believe in Him might have eternal life. For all who refuse to believe in Him, there is a final judgment, called the Great White Throne Judgment, where they are condemned, not on the basis of their sins, but because of their unbelief (John 3:16–19; Rev. 20:11–15).

6. **Two Races.** This means that all members of the human race fall into one of two categories: Those who are in Christ, and those who are in Adam—the living and the dead, the saved and the lost (1 Cor. 15:22).

7. **Two Spiritual Realities.** Those who are in Christ must learn to distinguish between their positional standing before God, and their daily practice in life. The first is perfect and righteous, the second is imperfect and can improve only by spiritual growth and obedience.

8. **Two Resurrections.** There will be two final resurrections: that of the just who have believed in Christ, and that of the unjust, who have rejected Him (John 3:16–19; 5:24–29). The saved will share eternal life with Jesus Christ forever, while the unbelieving will have their part in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:11–5).

CHAPTER 9—CONFESSION AND COVENANT

"Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever! Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise." Nehemiah 9:5

The chapter begins with the people fasting in sackcloth and confessing their sins, as they heard the Word of God read. This is now time for the confession which was delayed in Nehemiah 8:9. This is one of three great prayer/confession chapters in the Old Testament (Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9; and Daniel 9).

In preparation for this time, Ezra had apparently written out the covenant of vv. 5–38. In it, he begins by praising God (vv. 5–6), then making a long recital of Israel's history. He speaks of the call of Abram (vv. 7–8), the Exodus from Egypt (vv. 9–12), the giving of the Law through Moses (vv. 13–15), the rebellion of Israel (vv. 16–17), God's continued mercy in the face of multiple provocations (vv. 18–21), the entrance into the Promised Land (vv. 22–25), the time of the judges (vv. 26-29), and the ministry of the prophets (vv. 30–35). This leads to the making of a covenant—really, the restoration of the covenant God gave them at Sinai (vv. 36-38).

The little word "if" in v. 29 is one of the most critical words in the Bible (see Deut. 28:1, 15; Isa. 1:19–20; Jer. 18:8–10; John 7:37; Rom. 8:12–17; Col. 1:21–23; Heb. 3:7–15). If mankind has no free will, this word means nothing. If in fact we do (as the Scripture teaches), then it means everything!

CHAPTER 10—THE CORBAN CURSE

"We will not neglect the house of our God." Nehemiah 10:39

Remember the above statement when we get to Chapter 13. We will see how quickly our professions of faith and obedience too often are.

The details of the covenant made are covered in this chapter, as well as those who signed it.

The signatories include Nehemiah, the Levites, the leaders, and all the people (vv. 1–28). That they *"entered into a curse"* (v. 29) brings us to the corban offering (Matt. 15:5; Mark 7:11; Leviticus 27; Numbers 30; Jeremiah 35). The basic idea was an offering made to God based on a vow taken. That which was dedicated to God could not be used for common purposes. If the vow was broken, then God's judgment would fall. By the 13th chapter we will see they have already broken their vow, thus Nehemiah's severe reaction.

The main details of this commitment were to obey the law (v. 29), to avoid intermarriage with the heathen (v. 30), to observe the Sabbath (v. 31), and to bring offerings to support the Temple and the priests (vv. 32–39). They end with the statement *"We will not neglect the house of our God"* (v. 39).

B. <u>The Walk Restored</u> (Chapters 11–13)

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."
John 14:6

<u>Chapter 11—The Crook in The Lot</u>

"The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city … And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem."
Nehemiah 11:1–2

This is actually an after-effect of the covenant of Chapter 10. When we dedicate ourselves to God and His service, we often do not know the price that we will have to pay. To live in Jerusalem was to leave homes, farms, families—to go to the focal point of danger and attack. Some were drawn by lot, but the honored ones were the volunteers! These men and their families were the true heroes, *"choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin"* (Heb. 11:25).

Life is often not what we desire it to be. That is because God, as a wise Father, knows what is best for us, rather than what is pleasant for us. This is the proverbial "crook in the lot," also the title of a worthwhile book by the puritan, Thomas Boston. It is based on Ecclesiastes 7:13.

"Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked?"

The point is that there are tests, trials, and difficulties in life that cannot be avoided, and that cannot be changed. Both James and Peter include a lot of instruction for dealing with the painful necessities of life.

Like the people in the story of Nehemiah, we can either enter into these things by the inexorable "lot" of life, or we can deny ourselves, and take up the cross, and be thankful whatever may come (Psalm 16:5; 125:3; Luke 9:23; 1 Thess. 5:16–17).

God has a special place in Scripture and in His blessing for those who are volunteers for the difficult places!

"Your people shall be volunteers in the day of Your power, in the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning." Psalm 110:3

CHAPTER 12—DEDICATION AND THANKSGIVING

"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." Nehemiah 12:43

11:1–26 The Leaders.
In verse one, we see Zerubbabel, Joshua, and Ezra together (see Hag. 1:1–6; 2:1–5; Zech. 3:1–5; 4:6–10). It is possible that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah would have been present.

Also mentioned is Jaddua (v. 22; 10:21), who was later high priest when Alexander the Great approached Jerusalem. Jaddua went out in priestly robes to meet him, and showed him the prophecies of Daniel concerning him, and Alexander spared the city.

11:27–43 The Dedication.
The Levitical Choir was divided into two groups: one led by Ezra (vv. 27–38), the other was followed by Nehemiah—him taking the least place (See Luke 14:8–11). The two groups met at the Temple (v. 40) and sang praise to God. That small, little temple, which caused the old men to weep (Ezra 3:12), yet proved the Word by Zechariah to be true,

"This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD of hosts'... For who has despised the day of small things? For these seven rejoice to see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. They are the eyes of the LORD, which scan to and fro throughout the whole earth." Zechariah 4:6, 10

With the songs, there were sacrifices offered and such great joy that it was heard from afar (v. 43). My prayer for America, is that our current leaders will give cause to praise God for His deliverance, and that the joy and witness of America will be heard far and wide (1 Thess.1:6–10).

11:44–47 Temple Arrangements.
This seemingly insignificant section is of great importance. Nehemiah has taken great care to delegate faithful leadership over the people. Ezra has led them in a spiritual revival, resulting in the making of a covenant to be faithful to God and His Word. Priests and Levites have been appointed for the Temple service. Now, the final detail—those who would take charge of the storerooms of the Temple, where the offerings would be brought.

These storerooms would be the repository of offerings, by which the Priests and Levites would be supported so that they need not work to earn their own food and necessities. They could give undistracted devotion to the work of the Lord. The principle continues into the Church Age:

"Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel" 1 Corinthians 9:13–14.

Tragically, we will find out in the next chapter that, not only was the supply for the Priests not forthcoming from the people, but a far worse sin and more evil deed was done by these people.

CHAPTER 13—CURSING TURNED TO BLESSING

"However, our God turned the curse into a blessing." Nehemiah 13:2

Before we deal with the amazing truths contained in vv. 1–3, I would like to look at the final reforms of Nehemiah.

13:4–30 Nehemiah's Final Reforms.
During his twelve-year absence, things had gone downhill. Remember the proud vow of 10:39, *"We will not neglect the house of our God"*? They had actually done much worse than to neglect it!

Four spiritual abuses were confronting Nehemiah upon his return. Apparently the two men he left in charge (Neh. 7:1–2) were not courageous enough to confront and correct these glaring failures. Of Hananiah it was said, *"For he was a faithful man and feared God more than many"* (Neh. 7:2). He was what we might call "a good man." But when the battle is raging, it is not enough to be a good man. Rather, one must be not only good, but strong and courageous (Josh. 1:6–9). Apparently, neither Hananiah nor Nehemiah's brother Hanani had the essential courage to confront and correct these transgressions.

The first, and possibly worst, we read of in vv. 4–9. The high priest, Eliashib had made an apartment in the storerooms of the Temple for Tobiah, the enemy of God and of Nehemiah! This is where the offerings and first fruits were to be stored for the support of the priesthood. In his rage, Nehemiah threw Tobiah's belongings out and demanded that the rooms be ceremonially cleansed.

The next is the sin behind the first sin (vv. 10–14). One lesson we must learn in the Christian life is that sin always begets more sin (James 1:13–15). Here, we find that the Temple offerings, which were to support the Priests and Levites, had not been brought in. Thus, the storehouse was empty and, therefore, room was made for the enemy (Tobiah) to move into one of those rooms! No vacuum fills itself with something better! It always degenerates to that which is worse (Eph. 4:17–19).

Never forget that we are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19–20). If we allow any vacuum to develop in our lives, the devil will surely find a way to fill it. Read Ephesians 4:17–19 and consider that the word translated *"futility"* or *"vanity"* literally means "a vacuum."

The third problem (vv. 15–22) was the failure to observe the Sabbath. Why was this one command so emphasized in the Old Testament? Because it foretold the perfect rest that would be

found in the Messiah (Heb. 4:1, 8–11). Here, the people were conducting all kinds of business on that holy day. Nehemiah gathered the nobles, rebuked them, and commanded the gates be shut during the Sabbath. He also ran off the merchants who were doing the selling. Again, back in 10:31 they had vowed, *"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 ...."*

The fourth abuse really enraged Nehemiah (vv. 23–30). It was the age-old problem of mixed marriages. This had been dealt with by Ezra (Ezra 9), and by Nehemiah (Neh. 10:30).

Nehemiah was so enraged that he writes, *"I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair ..."* In one commentary I read, the author said, "Nehemiah's conduct here was surely not fitting for a man of God" (paraphrased). My response was, "Would to God we had more men of God like Nehemiah!"

He reminded them that this was the snare which debased the great King Solomon. If the high priest's favoritism to Tobiah in the section above was not bad enough, one of his grandsons had married a daughter of Sanballat (v. 28)!

Note: As a final lesson from the character of Nehemiah, we see throughout the book that he was a man of constant prayer (Neh. 1:4–11; 4:9; 9:4; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).

13:1–3 Cursing Turned to Blessing.
"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, because they ... hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing."

This section reminds us that sin, unchecked, spans generations, and has a grievous effect on those yet unborn. The origin of the Ammonites and Moabites is found in Genesis 19:30–36, in the drunken incest between Lot and his two daughters.

We move forward about 450–500 years to the story of **Balaam** in Numbers 23–24. The King of Moab, Balak, hires Balaam, a gentile prophet, to curse Israel, so that he might defeat them. God intervenes (using a talking Jackass) and turns Balaam's curse into four prophecies of His blessing on Israel.

Of special interest in our study is that in Numbers 24:7, Balaam speaks of **Agag** and declares that the king of Israel will be greater than he.

Because of the resistance of Moab and Ammon (blood relatives to Israel), God put them under a curse and a ban (Deut. 23:3–6). No descendant of either could enter into the assembly of Israel to the tenth generation!

Now consider again that Balaam speaks of Agag, and of the king of Israel that will be higher than him. Israel had no king when Balaam spoke his prophecy. However, about 450 years later, Israel asks for a king and gets Saul.

King Saul is commanded by God to utterly destroy the Amalekites, yet he spares Agag, and apparently some of his family. Saul is rejected by God for this disobedience, and the Lord chooses and anoints **David** king. Let's not forget that David's great-grandmother was Ruth, the Moabitess! God turned her cursing into blessing because of her faith, and humble service to Naomi.

During the Absalom Revolt (2 Sam. 15–18), Shimei, who is of the house of Saul, curses David as he flees from Jerusalem (2 Sam. 16:5–14). When David returns victorious, **Shimei** comes and asks for mercy, which David graciously gives (2 Sam. 19:18–23). It is David who is exalted by God to be Israel's great king. The forerunner of the *"KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS"* (Rev. 19:16).

Fast forward another 450 years or so. Now consider that it is in the midst of the events of Ezra/Nehemiah that the book of **Esther** is written. Esther means "star" in Hebrew, but it means "something hidden" in Persian. While the name of God is not found in the book, the entire story speaks of the invisible hand of divine providence. In the story, Esther saves the Jewish race by her charm and wisdom. Without this deliverance, neither Ezra nor Nehemiah would be written!

In the book of Esther, there are two protagonists: **Mordecai** and **Haman**. Mordecai is a descendant of Shimei (2 Sam. 16:5–13), and Haman is a descendant of Agag (Esther 3:1).

Had King Saul obeyed the Lord, Haman would not even be in the story. And if David had not shown mercy to Shimei, Mordecai would not be here. One is a product of man's disobedience to God, the other is the result of an act of mercy.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Matthew 5:7

By Mordecai's wise counsel, Esther is guided to take steps to deliver the Jews, and by this means Haman is put to death, while Mordecai is promoted and honored.

Now come down the path of history another 450 years, and we have the ultimate act that turned cursing to blessing for eternity. The Lord Jesus Christ took our curse of sin and shame upon Himself (Gal. 3:13–14), so that His promise to Abraham of the blessing of eternal life, and of all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3) could be given to all those who believe in Him. His is the climactic victory in history, in a long line of faithful men and women who lived and died in faith, looking to His coming (Hebrews 11). And that lineage of faith continues to this day in each and every believer who is faithful to the calling of God on his or her life. What we believe is spiritually essential. How we live it out in our lives is transformational, not just for ourselves, but for all those we influence!

"What we do in time echoes in eternity" – Marcus Aurelius
(quoted in the movie, Gladiator)

Point: We are all beneficiaries of faithful ancestors who have gone before. There are spiritual links in our lineage that we cannot fathom at this time, but one day will see.

"We do not merely study the past: we inherit it, and inheritance brings with it not only the rights of ownership, but the duties of trusteeship.

Things fought for and died for should not be idly squandered. For they are the property of others, who are not yet born." – Sir Roger Scruton

Conclusion

Is it possible that a republic, having fallen into corruption, can be restored, as Mike Vanderboegh wondered?

Are the parallels that we see with present-day America and President Trump, with the book of Nehemiah, only historical coincidence?

Will believers today take a heroic stand for the truth of the God's Word, and be willing to face off with the enemies of God?

Could it be that God in His grace and mercy will one day deliver America from our present darkness, so that the rejoicing of America would be heard from afar?

Will there be those among us today whose names will be recorded for acts of faithfulness and heroism, so that later generations will know their names?

Will the rampant greed, theft, corruption, and criminality in high places be rooted out and justice restored?

Like Nehemiah and his compatriots, we need to pray and watch, work and war, and let God in His infinite wisdom do the rest!