



Good News
Bible Reading Program

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— January 2005 —

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Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

Idea for a New Census; List of the First Return (Nehemiah 7:4-73)

January 1-3

Despite its spacious size, Jerusalem was still sparsely populated (verse 4). As it had been almost a century since the first return of exiles under Zerubbabel, it would seem that there should have been more people there. Yet the trouble that the city faced over the decades could have driven many families out into the countryside.

Nehemiah's unstated but implicit concern here is the repopulation and development of Jerusalem. We will later see in chapter 11 that his solution is to direct a portion of those in various parts of the province of Judea to resettle in the capital. Here in 7:5, "Nehemiah attributed to the Lord the idea of a census that would show the distribution of the population. If he knew the population pattern in the capital and the countryside, he could then determine which districts could best afford to lose a portion of their inhabitants to Jerusalem" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 5).

As he pondered the situation, he came across a list of those in the first return under Zerubbabel. It is basically the same as the list recorded earlier in Ezra 2. We covered Nehemiah 7:5-73 in conjunction with that prior passage for sake of comparison. We are reviewing it here because this is where it actually fits in the story. You may wish to look back over the Bible Reading Program comments on the earlier passage for an explanation of some of the variations in names and numbers.

Ezra Reads the Law During the Fall Feasts (Nehemiah 7:73-8:18)

January 4-5

Following the arrangement of the book of Nehemiah, the seventh month appears to come just five days after the completion of the city wall (compare 5:15). However, the year is a matter of dispute, as there are some chronological questions here and throughout the remainder of the book. It could be that the events of chapters 8-10 describe events that occurred much later—following some of Nehemiah's reforms described in chapter 13. Since the matter is uncertain, we are sticking with the scriptural arrangement in our reading of this section of the book.

The first day of the seventh month is one of God's annual Holy Days—the Feast of Trumpets (see Leviticus 23:23-25). The name of the feast does not occur in Nehemiah 8, but the fact that the first day of the seventh month is a Holy Day is explicitly stated (verses 10-11). This day marked the first day of the civil year and the Jews still refer to it as Rosh Hashanah, "Head of the Year" (the Jewish New Year).

Jews from all over Judea have come to Jerusalem. They gather in the open square between the southeastern part of the temple and the eastern wall (verse 1).

Here, for the first time in the story of Nehemiah, we see the appearance of Ezra. A number of critics maintain that this passage should follow Ezra 10, putting the events it describes long before Nehemiah's arrival (or placing Ezra's arrival long after that of Nehemiah). Nehemiah 8:9, however, shows that Nehemiah was the governor during this episode. The aforementioned critics view his name here as an erroneous editorial gloss. But there is no real warrant for such a conclusion. It is not at all unreasonable to believe the scriptural attestation that Ezra would have still been around 13 or more years after his arrival—that despite Samaritan actions against Jerusalem and the events surrounding the satrap Megabyzus' rebellion probably having swept him from office as governor, he would still have been a respected spiritual leader among the Jews (see also 12:26, 31, 36). The widespread idea that Ezra returned long after Nehemiah (during the reign of Artaxerxes II instead of Artaxerxes I) is an untenable one, as it requires the scriptural mentions of the two interacting together to be spurious additions to the text.

Returning to Nehemiah 8, Ezra is called on to read to the people from the Book of the Law of Moses. Exactly what the term *Book of the Law* specifies is debated. Some see it as the entire Pentateuch—the five books of Moses. Others view it as just Deuteronomy. Still others see it as certain sections of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Since Joshua wrote of the Shechem covenant near the end of his life in the Book of the Law (see Joshua 24:25-26), it seems that the book may have encompassed more than what is written in the Pentateuch. Following Ezra's reading, the history recounted afterward in Nehemiah 9 could argue for understanding the Book of the Law in the broad sense of the whole Pentateuch and perhaps even more of Scripture. Whatever the case, Ezra reads to the people for five or six hours, as the word translated "morning" in Nehemiah 8:3 actually specifies "dawn" as the starting point. He continues on until about noon, and the people remain attentive.

As the Law is presented, the Levites help the people to understand it (verses 7-8). The wording here is interesting. Rabbinic tradition maintains that the Levites were here translating the less familiar ancient Hebrew into Aramaic, the common language of the people since the exile in Babylon. And perhaps the phrase translated “gave the sense” does have that meaning—along with possibly explaining outdated idioms and other archaic usages. (Indeed, those skeptics who argue that the Mosaic Law was a priestly invention during the time of Ezra should note that this passage seems to show the Law as a very old document even then.) Yet the phrase that follows, “helped them to understand the reading,” may well have referred to some expounding on how to apply the principles and lessons contained in the Law.

On hearing the Law, the people sink into weeping—evidently sorrowful over their failure to live up to its demands. Gauging from this reaction, it seems to have been a long time since the Law was read. It could be that the command to read it every seventh year at the Feast of Tabernacles was being followed (see Deuteronomy 31:9-13) and that it was now seven years since the previous reading. And it may be, if the book is not arranged chronologically, that this whole episode was following the serious lapses of chapter 13, which we will read later.

Though Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites were no doubt glad to see such widespread heartfelt contrition, they nevertheless pointed out the need for the people to strive to refrain from weeping at this time so as to rejoice in God’s Holy Day (Nehemiah 8:9-12). The people are encouraged to indulge in fine food and drink and to share with others in need. If the events of chapter 8 followed the completion of the wall by only a few days, as the scriptural arrangement would seem to imply, then there would have been a lot of people in need at this time, given that Nehemiah would have only just instituted his economic reforms of chapter 5 within the past two months.

It is wonderful to see the leaders of the people coming again the next day with a desire to learn more of the Law (verse 13). These leaders were likely being given specialized instruction so as to be able to in turn teach those over whom they served. As they listen, the reading comes to Leviticus 23, which mentions dwelling in booths and the gathering of branches as part of celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles (verses 40, 42-43; compare Nehemiah 8:14-15), the term “tabernacles” denoting booths—temporary shelters. Again, this feast is not named in Nehemiah 8 either. It is simply called the “feast of the seventh month” (verse 14) and said to last seven days with a sacred assembly on the eighth day (verse 18; compare Leviticus 23:33-36, 39).

It is surprising to read in Nehemiah 8:17 that the nation had not made temporary shelters and dwelt under them since the time of Joshua. Clearly, the Feast of Tabernacles had been observed in the intervening centuries, such as under Solomon (see 1 Kings 8:65; 2 Chronicles 7:9) and even more recently under Zerubbabel (see Ezra 3:4). How is it, then, that the Israelites had not constructed booths out of branches for more than 900 years even during times of national faithfulness? It could be that many had but that the “whole assembly” (see again Nehemiah 8:17) had not done so since Joshua’s time. Another explanation may be that Leviticus 23 does not explicitly state that the branches are to be used for such construction. It merely states that the people were to gather branches and, mentioned separately, that they were to dwell in temporary dwellings. Perhaps those in intervening centuries understood their temporary housing in Jerusalem as meeting the Feast’s requirement or, as Judaism today teaches, that booths could be made with other materials—with the branches simply carried in worship and used for festival decoration. According to this explanation, the Jews at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah come to see the branches as construction material for the booths and reinstitute a practice not seen since Joshua’s day. In any case, it is clear from Jewish tradition that the people at some point began carrying branches about as part of their worship during the festival—as observant Jews still do today.

The Feast in Nehemiah 8 is observed with exuberant gladness, reminiscent of the great joy at the renewal of the Passover under Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30:26) and at the revival under Josiah (2 Kings 23:22; 2 Chronicles 35:18). This was a wonderful time, with the Book of the Law being read from each day (Nehemiah 8:18). Indeed, God’s law brings great joy—in understanding the truth, and much more in living by it.

Moreover, there was a rebuilt city wall for which to be thankful. Indeed, whether the fall festivals of chapter 8 came the next month after the completion of the city wall or many years later after its rededication, the chapter arrangement fits thematically either way. The autumn festival period represents the time when Jesus Christ will return to the earth to defend His people, restore them and their land and set up His rule from Jerusalem. There was a small prototype of this in the mission of Nehemiah. Furthermore, when Christ returns He will lead Judah and Israel in spiritual reformation. That too is prefigured in the national turning to God at the reading of His law in

Nehemiah 8 and the commitment of the people as related in the next two chapters along with Nehemiah's reforms described later in the book.

The Levites' Psalm (Nehemiah 9)

January 6-7

On the 24th day of the seventh month, two days after the sacred assembly following the Feast of Tabernacles, the people gather in public fasting and repentance (verses 1-2; compare 8:18). This was just two weeks after a commanded holy fast day, the Day of Atonement, which the people would have observed on the 10th day of the seventh month, between the Feast of Trumpets and the Feast of Tabernacles. For just as the leaders on the second day of the month had read about the Feast of Tabernacles in Leviticus 23 (see Nehemiah 8:13-15), they would also have read about the Day of Atonement at the same time, since it too is described in Leviticus 23 (as well as in Leviticus 16).

Perhaps, in learning much more of the Law through the Feast of Tabernacles, the people came to see that they had much more about which to repent. Moreover, the fast on the 24th was preparatory to an official renewal of the covenant relationship with God, as explained in Nehemiah 9:38 and chapter 10. Jesus taught that His followers should fast (Matthew 9:15), clearly referring to more than just the annual fast of the Day of Atonement (although Christians also continued to observe this commanded fast, as alluded to in Acts 27:9). Fasting is a way to clear the mind of distractions and give concentrated thought to spiritual matters.

Verse 2 mentions the children of Israel having separated themselves from all foreigners (see also 10:28). While this could simply refer to the Jews distinguishing themselves from the pagan world around them, some who view chapters 8–10 as falling later in Nehemiah's governorship see the separation as a reference to ending the intermarriage problems described later in the book (see Nehemiah 10:30; 13:3, 23-30). Foreigners were welcomed in Israel, so long as they adopted the worship of the true God and forsook their pagan religions entirely. Circumcision of their males demonstrated their commitment to God (Exodus 12:43-49). Whatever the case, the intent was to serve as the special, distinct people God intended His nation to be.

On this special fast day, the Book of the Law was read for about three hours, and another three hours were spent in congregational worship (9:3).

In verse 5, a group of Levites give a call to praise: "Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever." Some see these words as the commencement of a psalm that continues to the end of the chapter. Others see them as simply calling for the psalm or poetic prayer that follows, beginning with the words "Blessed be Your glorious name" and then continuing to the end of the chapter. This address to God reviewing His consistent intervention in Israel's history is sometimes referred to as the Levites' Psalm. Yet some refer to it as the Prayer of Ezra—seeing it as his response, perhaps already planned and written out, to the Levites' call to praise. The former seems more likely—that is, that this was all part of what the Levites spoke or sang—since Ezra's name is not mentioned. However, if it were spoken or sung together by the Levites, it had to have been written out ahead of time—and Ezra could certainly have helped with that.

This eloquent psalm recites the faithfulness of God throughout Israel's existence despite the persistent *unfaithfulness* of Israel. The recounting of the history was probably fresh on the minds of the people to whom the Book of the Law had been read over a three-week period. This passage is a testimony not only to God's powerful intervention on behalf of His people, but also of His great mercy and loyalty toward those with whom He had established His covenants. The psalm begins with the glory of God's name and His greatness as the Creator (verses 5-6). It then goes through God's involvement with Israel throughout the nation's history (verses 7-31): the call of Abraham and the promise of Canaan (verses 7-8); the deliverance from Egypt (verses 9-11); the time in the wilderness, including the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and the revelation of the weekly Sabbath (verses 12-21); the conquest of Canaan (verses 22-25); the period of the judges (verses 26-28); and the succession of prophets during the period of the monarchies of Israel and Judah (verses 29-31). Next we see the nation's subjugation to foreign powers as the righteous judgment of God—the period in which the people still find themselves in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (verses 32-37).

With the example of God's faithfulness so powerfully before them in this historical review, the people commit to emulating His faithfulness through the making of a sure covenant with Him and abiding by it (verse 38). We will read about the sealing of this covenant in the next chapter.

Covenant to Obey God and Support His House (Nehemiah 10)

January 8-9

It is apparently still the 24th day of the seventh month (see chapters 8–9). Nehemiah lists the signers of the covenant made on this day (see 9:38). "The way someone 'signed' a document in the ancient world was similar to the use of a wax seal in more recent times. A distinctive seal was pressed

into soft clay. The pattern of the seal showed what authority issued that document” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 10:1).

Nehemiah was the first to sign. Verses 2-8 then list the priests who placed their seals on the covenant. “Some of these names appear in a later list as heads of priestly houses (12:11-20). Twenty-one priests who were heads of households signed the agreement in the name of the houses and families of their respective classes. Ezra’s name does not appear, perhaps indicating that he was not the head of a household” (note on 10:2-8). It could also be that Ezra wrote the document, serving not as a representative of the people in this covenant but as a mediator between the people and God—perhaps alongside the high priest Eliashib, whose name does not appear here either.

Seventeen Levites, some of whom later appear as heads of Levitical orders (see 12:8), also signed (10:9-13)—as did 44 civil leaders (verses 14-27). As for the rest of the people, though they did not themselves sign, they did agree to the terms of the covenant, which called for a curse on them if they failed to keep their oath of obedience to the Law that God gave through Moses (verses 28-29).

Special mention is given in the covenant to not intermarrying with people from the neighboring nations (verse 30). It could be that this problem was given consideration because of what happened prior to Ezra’s governorship (see Ezra 9–10). However, it could also refer to the resurfacing of the problem as later discovered by Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:23-30). As was mentioned in the Bible Reading Program comments on our previous reading, the reference to the people having separated themselves from the peoples of the lands in 10:28 (and 9:2) have led some to conclude that the events of chapters 8–10 occurred much later in Nehemiah’s administration than where they fit in arrangement order (compare 13:3). Yet it could be that this covenant came early in Nehemiah’s administration and the problems arose later in spite of it. The biblical record demonstrates time and again that knowing what God wanted them to do was no guarantee that the people would do so.

Another concern addressed in the covenant is the buying of wares and grain—that is, doing one’s shopping for the coming days—on the Sabbath (10:31). Here again is a very specific problem that Nehemiah later dealt with as governor (see 13:15-22). Perhaps this was an issue addressed early on in Nehemiah’s administration that defiantly returned at a later time. The Sabbath command is appropriately known as the “test commandment” (compare Exodus 16, especially verse 4) because it presents a strong challenge for people to set aside their normal everyday wants and business in order to worship God. On the other hand, if the chapter arrangement of Nehemiah is not chronological, it could be that the problem occurred late and that this covenant followed it. Since the two problems of intermarriage and Sabbath breaking occur in both contexts, the latter seems a distinct possibility. As *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* notes on Nehemiah 10:31: “The provisions of vv. 31-34 may have been a code drawn up by Nehemiah to correct the abuses listed in chapter 13 (e.g., vv. 15-22).”

The people also agreed in the covenant to observe the Sabbatical year—that is, in every seventh year they would leave their fields uncultivated (to allow the nutrients in the soil to build up, thereby preventing the depletion of the land) and cancel debts owed them (10:31; see Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7; Deuteronomy 15:1-6).

They further agreed to pay a temple tax of a third of a shekel for the ongoing expense of temple worship services—similar to the half shekel paid by the Israelites in Moses’ day for the tabernacle (see Exodus 30:11-16). *Expositor’s* lists a few possible explanations as to “why the offering should be a third rather than a half shekel. (1) Some maintain that the half-shekel of Exodus (30:16; 38:25-28) was meant as a onetime offering for the construction of the tabernacle and therefore has no bearing on the offering in Nehemiah 10:32. (2) Others argue that the offering was reduced from one-half to one-third because of economic impoverishment. (3) Some argue that the later shekel was based on a heavier standard, thus one-third of the later shekel was equal to one-half of the earlier shekel. That is, the later Babylonian-Persian shekel was twenty-one grams, whereas the former Phoenician shekel was fourteen grams, hence one-third the former was equal to one-half the latter” (note on verse 32).

Verse 34 says that lots were cast to determine who would provide the “wood offering” and in what order. Though no such offering was directly mentioned in the law, it is clear that the perpetually burning altar fire would have required an ongoing supply of wood (compare Leviticus 6:12-13). “Josephus mentions ‘the festival of wood-offering’ on the fourteenth day of the fifth month (Ab), when all the people were accustomed to bring wood for the altar (*War[s] of the Jews*, Book 2, chap. 17, sec. 6]...). The Mishnah (*Taanith* 4.5) lists nine times when certain families brought wood” (note on Nehemiah 10:34).

The covenant further confirms that the people would be faithful in the offering of the firstfruits and firstborn and in the payment of tithes (verses 35-38). The focus of these commitments is brought out well in the last words of the document: “We will not neglect the house of our God” (verse 39). Like Sabbath breaking and intermarriage, failure to provide for the temple and priesthood through tithes and offerings was yet another matter specifically addressed by Nehemiah in chapter 13 (verses 10-14)—lending further support to the possibility that the covenant of chapter 10 was made after the events of chapter 13.

As the “house of our God” today is His Church, we should see in all this a parallel for us. We must all be committed to separating ourselves from the world, obeying God in all areas of our lives and providing for the needs of the Church and the work He has given it to do.

The People of Jerusalem and Other Towns of Judea (Nehemiah 11) January 10-11

In chapter 5, Nehemiah had been concerned with the lack of people living in Jerusalem and a census was taken of the Jews of Judea with that concern in mind. Now we see that this was to provide the groundwork for a redistribution of the population so as to move more people into the capital. Nehemiah’s solution was to “tithes” from the outlying areas—directing a tenth of the people from around the country to relocate to Jerusalem.

This was determined by lot (10:1)—as was the responsibility for the wood offering in our previous reading (10:34). “The casting of lots, small stones or pieces of wood, was viewed by the Jews as a pious way of determining God’s will. Thus Nehemiah left the choice of those who should move to Jerusalem up to God. The practice was used in choosing portions of the land to be occupied by the original conquerors of Canaan in Joshua’s time” (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion*, 1991, p. 320).

Yet notice from verse 2 that those who moved did so as a willing offering of themselves. To uproot from family and friends and move to a distant place to forge new friendships and a new life is never an easy thing. Yet, they were willing to move for the sake of serving God, just as people through the ages have done (and still do) to serve God’s work and purpose.

Verses 3-24 list various residents of Jerusalem and some of their responsibilities. Verses 25-36 then list people in outlying areas. As in other passages regarding the people of Judea following the Babylonian Exile, we can see here that only two tribes of Israel are represented besides the priests and Levites—Judah and Benjamin. The people of the tribe of Judah dwelt in 17 towns and their surrounding villages. The Benjamites lived in 15 towns. “The limits of the Judean settlement after the return from Babylon have been confirmed by archaeological evidence; none of the YHD-YHWD (the official designation of the Persian province of Judea) coins have been found outside the area demarcated by these verses” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verses 25-30).

The Religious Leadership (Nehemiah 12:1-26) January 12-13

This passage lists leaders among the priests and Levites in the time of the first return under Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua and in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Verses 12-21 give the later heads of the priestly families that arrived with Zerubbabel, listed in verses 1-7. The following succession of high priests is given: Jeshua; Joiakim; Eliashib (high priest when Nehemiah arrives); Joiada; Jonathan; Jaddua (verses 10-11, 22). There is wide dispute over whether this list is complete or skips some generations.

Verse 22 mentions this record being kept during the reign of “Darius the Persian.” This evidently refers to Emperor Darius II, also known as Ochus or Nothus, who reigned from 423 to 404 B.C.—though some argue for Darius III (Codomanus), who reigned from 336 until his overthrow by Alexander the Great in 330. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states: “The fact that a Jaddua is mentioned as the high priest [at the time of Alexander] by Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 11, chap. 7, sec. 2)... has caused some scholars to favor the later king [Darius III]. A Johanan appears, however, as the high priest [of Jerusalem] in an Elephantine papyrus [from the Jewish community of southern Egypt] dated to 407 B.C....and this favors an identification with Darius II. The recently discovered Samaria papyri [illustrating the routine practice of alternating generations having the same name] has persuaded some scholars that the Jaddua in Nehemiah was not the Jaddua in Josephus but the grandfather of the latter” (note on verse 22). The latter seems most likely, as the same commentary details in its introduction to the book of Ezra.

The tradition attributing to Ezra the compilation of this book and the canonization of the Old Testament also argues for identifying Darius here as Darius II (whose reign came 34 years after Ezra’s arrival in Judea)—and for Jaddua being an earlier high priest than the one referred to by

Josephus. This is because Ezra would no longer have been living by the time of Darius III's reign and Alexander's conquest (as this would have been more than 120 years after his arrival).

For our next reading we are skipping over the rest of chapter 12 concerning the dedication of the city wall and skipping to 13:4, which begins a section that, as this verse states, came *before* the events surrounding the dedication. Chapter 13, as we will see, describes problems that Nehemiah faced when he returned from a trip back to the Persian court at the end of his initial 12 years as governor (see verses 6-7; compare 5:14).

Returning Home and Finding a Mess (Nehemiah 13:4-31)

January 14-15

Nehemiah's first term as governor lasted 12 years—from the 20th year of Artaxerxes (444 B.C.) to the king's 32nd year (432-431 B.C.) (see Nehemiah 2:1; 5:14; 13:6). Either Nehemiah was recalled to the Persian court at this time or it was the agreed-upon term limit from the start (compare 2:6). Note that Artaxerxes is referred to in 13:6 as the king of Babylon. This was accurate since Babylon was now part of Persia. It remained a significant fact since Babylonia was where most of the Jewish exiles dwelt. Moreover, it could be that the emperor was in temporary residence in Babylon when Nehemiah returned to him.

We don't know how long Nehemiah remained at the imperial court. It could have been several months or even a few years. Verse 23 seems to argue for the latter, as we will see. In any case, it was evidently long enough for some serious lapses to occur in Judea during his absence.

When he finally comes back, Nehemiah encounters some major problems. First of all, his old nemesis Tobiah has returned. Recall that Tobiah, evidently the Ammonite governor who was probably part Jewish and related to some of the priests—and to whom many in Jerusalem had been pledged in service—was one of the main enemies who had attempted to thwart the rebuilding of the city wall, even writing threatening letters to Nehemiah (2:10, 19; 4:3; 6:10-12, 17, 19). And now this wicked man has his own guest quarters in the temple compound itself as sanctioned by the high priest! (13:4-7). It is an unconscionable outrage—an affront, in fact, to God Himself. Stunned and dismayed at what has happened, Nehemiah takes immediate action, having Tobiah's furnishings thrown out and the defiled rooms cleansed (verses 8-9).

What brought the high priest Eliashib down from his wonderful example of personally working on the wall (see 3:1) to this disgrace is unknown. It may have been an act of desperation to keep a failing priesthood functioning. Consider that in his investigation of the matter, Nehemiah realizes that the people of Judea have not been giving their tithes and offerings to the Levites. With no means to live, the Levites employed at the temple returned to farming as a way to get by (verse 10). With very little supplied to them, the Levites did not in turn tithe and give offerings to the temple for the priests (compare 10:38). Notice that Tobiah was actually housed in the area that had previously been used to store the tithes and offerings (13:5). These rooms were evidently empty and unused. Perhaps Tobiah had used this situation as an inroad back into Jerusalem, particularly if some who had been formerly pledged to him called upon his help. It could well be that Tobiah struck a deal with Eliashib to provide for the needs of the priests if he were given the access to the temple complex. Perhaps there were certain other incentives such as renewed pledges of loyalty.

As to *why* the tithing and offering system had broken down, nothing is said. Perhaps the people simply let down in what they should have been doing. This matter could have been brewing even before Nehemiah left—coming to a head when the problem finally manifested itself in food shortages during his absence. In any case, the governor takes the leaders of the nation to task over this situation and finally gets the tithing system going again, appointing faithful overseers to ensure fair distribution (verses 11-13). In contrast to the poor example of Eliashib, Nehemiah showed himself steadfast in God's way through all these years since we were first introduced to him. And he prays to God to reward his faithful leadership (verse 14).

It should be noted that if the covenant of chapter 10 was made years earlier, then the people let down in these areas despite its specific mention of maintaining faithfulness in tithes, offerings and providing for God's house. Yet, if the arrangement order of the book is not strictly chronological, it could be that the covenant was made *after* the events of chapter 13 *because* of them. The same applies to the other two major problems Nehemiah dealt with after his return—Sabbath violation (verses 15-22) and intermarriage (verses 23-28).

Concerning the first problem, foreigners were coming into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day doing work inside the city and hauling in provisions, which were then sold to the Jews. Yet the law had specifically forbidden even foreigners from doing work within the gates of the Israelites—that is, within areas they controlled (see Exodus 20:10). The Jews were in the wrong not only for permitting

this but also for what they themselves were doing—going about their regular shopping for the coming days on God’s Holy Day. Some see this passage as implying that it is wrong to pay for a meal on the Sabbath. Yet there is nothing in the Law that specifically forbids making a payment for something on the Sabbath. What the Law prohibited was *working* on the Sabbath such as doing regular business. Indeed, the Fourth Commandment is to treat the Sabbath as holy—distinct and separate, devoted to God. Yet here the Jews were engaging in routine commerce and stocking up on provisions for future use, thereby taking time and focus away from the observance of this special day.

Nehemiah’s immediate solution to the problem is to close the city gates during the Sabbath. After a couple Sabbaths of merchants camping outside the city—obviously in an attempt to lure the Jews into a return to shopping—Nehemiah threatens to take them into custody if they persist, leading them to stop (verses 19-22). Again Nehemiah prays for God to remember his service and to grant him mercy and salvation (verse 22).

As quick as Nehemiah is to deal with this matter, it seems highly unlikely that it could have been happening in the latter years of his prior administration. It must have started while he was away. A spiritual letdown that had been underway for some time, as evidenced by the lack of tithing, moved out of the shadows and became full blown in Nehemiah’s absence. Yet there was probably a more immediate reason for the buying and selling on the Sabbath. This whole situation was very likely connected to the presence of Tobiah. Perhaps many of the foreign merchants were part of the contingent the Ammonite governor brought with him. Allowing large numbers of foreigners to set up shop in the city may have been part of the bargain struck between Tobiah and the high priest (and other city leaders). It was only to be expected that these merchants would operate with no regard for the Sabbath just as they always had—or, if they gave it superficial homage to start with, that they would do all they could to push the boundaries so as to gradually flout this inconvenience.

This all speaks to the consequences of Eliashib’s terribly wrong decision. It is unlikely that he foresaw or intended these corruptions, but they teach a painful lesson. What seems like a small compromise at the time can often snowball into a cascade of sins.

The other problem Nehemiah encountered, intermarriage, was also probably a result of the reintroduction of Tobiah and his allies into Jewish society. Indeed, a grandson of the high priest had married the daughter of—of all people—Sanballat the Horonite, the Samaritan governor and archenemy of the Jews of Judea! (verse 28; see 2:10; 4:1-3, 7; 6:1-9, 12-14). This may have been part of cementing the alliance between Eliashib and Tobiah. Nehemiah mentions some Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab (verse 23). The people of Ammon and Moab would have been from Tobiah’s province. And the city of Ashdod was allied to Tobiah and Sanballat (see 4:7-8). This was a former Philistine city yet, as explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on chapter 4, its inhabitants were probably not full-blooded Philistines (compare Zechariah 9:6) as the city was destroyed by the Assyrians, repopulated by the Babylonians and given by the Persians to the people of Tyre and Sidon as an important port. Some of the Tyrian merchants of verse 16 may have been from Ashdod.

The “language of Ashdod” (verse 24) may have been Philistine, a Phoenician dialect or a local dialect of Aramaic, the international language of the Persian Empire. The language of Judea refers to either Hebrew or the Jewish dialect of Aramaic. Given that Judea was such a small province, it seems unlikely that the problem of intermarriage had been going on during the later years of Nehemiah’s first term in office, for he would most likely have found out about it and taken steps to put a stop to it. Yet if these marriages took place during his absence, then he must have been gone a few years to allow enough time for children to be born to them and for the children to grow to speaking age.

There may not have been many such children. Perhaps there were relatively few offenders thus far. Nevertheless, intermarriage with pagans was a “great evil” (verse 27). This problem had faced Ezra upon his arrival in Judea. And here it was again. Ezra’s initial response had been mourning and pulling out his own hair (see Ezra 9:1-4). Nehemiah’s different temperament is illustrated in his more drastic reaction of pulling out the *offenders’* hair! (Nehemiah 13:25).

As with the Sabbath and tithing, it is not clear if the covenant to refrain from such intermarriage in chapter 10 came long before a resurgence of the problem in chapter 13 or if the covenant was made after Nehemiah’s dealing with the problem in chapter 13. As the prophet Malachi addresses some of the same issues dealt with in Nehemiah 13, many date his book to the time of Nehemiah’s absence. Yet it could well have been earlier, prior to Nehemiah’s initial arrival. Since the matter is unclear, we will wait until we have covered all of Nehemiah before reading the book of Malachi.

Yet again, Nehemiah prays to be remembered by God (Nehemiah 13:31). Though this is the end of the book, we have one more reading from Nehemiah that follows it chronologically.

The Dedication of the Wall and**Separation From Foreigners (Nehemiah 12:27–13:3)****January 16-17**

Many believe that the dedication described in this passage most naturally follows the 52-day rebuilding of the city wall in chapters 3–6. Others see it as occurring a little later if the book's arrangement is chronological. Yet still others recognize it as occurring many years later—following the events of our previous reading. Indeed, a straightforward reading of the text leads to this conclusion. For according to Nehemiah 13:4, the reading from the law in verses 1-3 resulting in a separation from foreigners came *before* the high priest Eliashib provided Tobiah with quarters within the temple—which happened during Nehemiah's absence (see verses 6-7). And the reading of the law and resultant separation are said to have happened “on that day” (13:1)—that is, on the day of the events of the previous passage describing the dedication of the wall and Levitical appointments made at the same time.

It appears odd that the city wall would be dedicated more than 12 years—and probably more like 15 or more years—from the time of its completion. It seems more likely that this was a *rededication*. And there would have been a good reason for this based on our previous reading. Notice in verse 30 that the people, gates and wall were purified. They had been defiled. Consider what had transpired. The wall and gates of Jerusalem had been rebuilt to maintain the peace and sanctity of the people and temple within. Yet the defenses had been “penetrated”—not by force of arms but by permitting evil to flow in (through the admittance of Tobiah and the Sabbath-breaking merchants and the intermarrying with pagans). So there was a real need here to purify the city wall and rededicate it to the sanctifying and protective purpose for which it was constructed. No doubt this would also have refocused the people on the great spiritual work and reformation of earlier years—helping to inspire a national recommitment to God and His ways.

As to the details of the ceremony, “There were two great processions, starting probably from the area of the Valley Gate (2:13, 15; 3:13) in the center of the western section of the wall. The first procession led by Ezra ([12:]36) and Hoshaiiah (v. 32) moved in a counterclockwise direction on the wall; the second with Nehemiah moved in a clockwise direction. They met between the Prison Gate and the Water Gate and then entered the temple area (cf. Ps 48:12-13). ‘To the right’ [in Nehemiah 12:31] translates *yamin*. The literal rendering is misleading, as this procession went left to the south. The Semite oriented himself facing east; so the right hand represented the south (cf. the name of Yemen in southern Arabia; see Josh 17:7; 1 Sam 23:24; Job 23:9)” (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Nehemiah 12:31). Notice also that here we again see Ezra and Nehemiah together as contemporaries.

The specific mention of the prohibition of Ammonites and Moabites from God's national assembly as discovered in the law and the separation this brought about (13:1-3) is directly related to what had happened in Nehemiah's absence—the admittance of the Ammonite governor to the temple (verses 4-7) and the intermarriage with women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab (verse 23).

Many would contend, and it could well be, that chapters 8–10 describing the reading of the law at the fall festivals and the renewal of the covenant that followed it actually follows after 13:3 chronologically.

As to why the events of our previous and current readings are switched around from chronological order in the book's arrangement, we can perhaps see a logical reason. The first part of chapter 12 (verses 1-26) lists the leaders of the priests and Levites. This is probably followed by a description of the dedication ceremony because it gives a further listing of the Levites and their responsibilities (verses 27-47). Next the reading of the law and resultant separation from foreigners is mentioned because this happened on the same day (13:1-3). Finally, in the remainder of chapter 13, an explanation is given as to why this dedication ceremony and separation from foreigners was happening. This arrangement, probably chosen by Ezra in his compilation work, also allows the book to end with a prayer for God to remember all that Nehemiah had done in His service (13:31).

In its note on this verse, *Expositor's* gives a great summary of Nehemiah's life and work: “Nehemiah provides us with one of the most vivid patterns of leadership in Scriptures.

“1. *He was a man of responsibility*, as shown by his position as the royal cupbearer.

“2. *He was a man of vision*, confident of who God was and what he could do through his servants. He was not, however, a visionary but a man who planned and then acted.

“3. *He was a man of prayer* who prayed spontaneously and constantly even in the presence of the king (2:4-5).

“4. *He was a man of action and cooperation*, who realized what had to be done, explained it to others, and enlisted their aid. Nehemiah, a layman, was able to cooperate with his contemporary, Ezra the scribe and priest, in spite of the fact that these two leaders were of entirely different temperaments.

“5. *He was a man of compassion*, who was moved by the plight of the poorer members of society so that he renounced even the rights he was entitled to (5:18) and denounced the greed of the wealthy (5:8).

“6. *He was a man who triumphed over opposition*. His opponents tried ridicule (4:3), attempted slander (6:4-7), and spread misleading messages (6:10-14). But through God’s favor Nehemiah triumphed over all difficulties.”

“The Kingdom of Judah: Exile and Restoration” — Part 2

(From Archaeology and the Bible series, *The Good News*, March/April 1999) January 18-19

by Mario Seiglie

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Persian Period: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

The Old Testament period ends during the era of Persian rule. Several Bible books accurately describe the Persian customs of the time. While the books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate the return of the Jews to the land of Judah, the book of Esther recounts the story of a young Jewish girl named Esther who became the queen of King Xerxes I.

Nehemiah’s story begins with his service to the Persian king. “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 . . .” (Nehemiah 2:1). While the title of cupbearer doesn’t sound important today, it was one of the highest government posts of that time.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia explains: “[The cupbearer was] an officer of high rank at ancient oriental courts, whose duty it was to serve the wine at the king’s table. On account of the constant fear of plots and intrigues, a person must be regarded as thoroughly trustworthy to hold this position . . . His confidential relations with the king often endeared him to his sovereign and also gave him a position of great influence” (1979, Vol. I, p. 837, “Cupbearer”).

Archaeologists have discovered a list of salaries paid to the highest Assyrian officials. This record reflects the general values of similar posts in the Persian administration. After the commanding general, the prime minister and the palace authority came the cupbearer, who earned the fourth-largest salary in the kingdom.

Nehemiah had enough wealth accumulated when he arrived as Jerusalem’s new governor that he had no need to tax the suffering populace. Indeed he apparently took it on himself to personally provide for a large number of his Jewish countrymen. “And at my table,” he writes, “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” (Nehemiah 5:17-18).

Queen Esther saves the Jews

Even though thousands of Jews successfully resettled the territory of the former kingdom of Judah, many remained dispersed throughout the chief cities of the Persian Empire. The book of Esther gives us a glimpse of the influence the Jewish community had in the empire between 500 and 450 B.C., as well as the problems that influence sometimes engendered.

One of the Persian officials, Haman, complained to the king about the Jews: “There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people’s, and they do not keep the king’s laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain” (Esther 3:8). “And the king said to Haman, ‘The money and the people are given to you, to do with them as seems good to you’” (verse 11).

As the book that honors her name recounts, thanks to Queen Esther’s courage and faith, God miraculously intervened and caused her people to be spared. The book of Esther was obviously written by someone familiar with the procedures and customs of the Persian court of the mid-fifth century B.C.

Much archaeological evidence of this Jewish influence has been found throughout the territory of the Persian Empire. Assyriologist Georges Conteau writes:

“Hundreds of clay tablets have been found dating back to the beginning of the Persian period which deal with a prosperous Jewish enterprise, Murashu and Sons. When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC, he deported some of the noble families to Babylon, and the Murashu family was among them.

“The family of exiles prospered in the city of Nippur and reached its maximum influence and wealth under the Persian rule of Artaxerxes I (564-424 BC) and Darius II (423-405 BC). Many of the documents of the firm are written in both cuneiform and Aramaic characters so they can be more easily understood by a wider audience. Most deal with contracts, payments or rentals” (*Daily Life in Babylon and Assyria*, 1958, p. 95).

We have already seen in this article that the Persian customs and history of the account of Esther also ring true. Speaking of Esther, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* notes: “The author employs the customary formula for the beginning of an historical account . . . [and] his references to Persian customs show considerable accurate knowledge . . . More recently cuneiform evidence has been found to show that there was a Persian official named *Marduka* (Mordecai) in Susa [Shushan] at the end of the reign of Darius I or the beginning of the reign of Xerxes” (1962, Vol. II, p. 151, “Esther, Book of”).

In the book of Esther, Mordecai is Esther’s uncle and is a high government official who is ultimately named as prime minister to the king.... *GN*

“Nehemiah: Portrait of a Leader”

(From Profiles of Faith series, *The Good News*, March/April 1999)

January 20-21

by Mario Seiglie

It may come as a surprise that the Scriptures—the Holy Bible—contain a course in leadership, given by one of the most remarkable, although little-known, leaders in the Bible: Nehemiah. His life and the principles he espoused serve as a guide to tackling life’s most difficult problems. It is a classic study on successfully leading as God would have us lead: by setting an example of faith in God.

In the book of the Bible bearing his name, Nehemiah records his memoirs. He tells how, against tremendous odds, he accomplished an unimaginably difficult undertaking.

Chronologically, the book of Nehemiah should come at the end of the Old Testament. Jerusalem was in ruins and surrounded by powerful enemies. Any attempt to rebuild the desolate city was met with an immediate mobilizing of forces against the Jews and was prohibited by the mighty Persian Empire, which ruled the region.

In the midst of these obstacles, Nehemiah accepted the challenge of rebuilding Jerusalem, which meant fortifying its walls, repopulating the city and setting up for Judah a solid and God-fearing government.

The book of Nehemiah begins ca. 444 B.C., some 90 years after the first group of Jews returned to Jerusalem under a leader named Zerubbabel. The temple was rebuilt, but Jerusalem as a whole was still in ruins. A second group arrived later, led by Ezra the scribe, but the walls that should have protected the inhabitants still lay in ruin.

In those days, a city without walls could offer its inhabitants no protection and was subject to frequent raids. Few people would venture to live in such a vulnerable place. As a result, Jerusalem at that time was more of a shrine than a city. Most of the people lived outside of the gates.

Against the backdrop of this desperate situation, the book of Nehemiah begins.

Survivors in distress

Why did Nehemiah decide to go to Jerusalem? In his own words: “Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah . . . 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’” (Nehemiah 1:1-3).

Nehemiah lived in Shushan, or Susa, one of the three royal cities of the Persian Empire. The Persians had governed that part of the world for nearly a century. In chapter 2, Nehemiah tells us he was a cupbearer for the king of Persia. (See sidebar: “The Trusted Cupbearer.”)

Nehemiah doesn’t boast about his position; he just informs us what he was doing and where he was when the news of Jerusalem’s disastrous plight came to him. He had many reasons to be content where he was. He lived in comfort and even splendor, and his king was pleased with him. Nevertheless, he was a Jew and deeply devoted to God. Soon he would give up his privileged life to face enormous problems and dangers out of love for God and his countrymen.

When the news came to Nehemiah about the pitiful condition of his people in Jerusalem, he was shocked and grieved.

He knew that 15 years earlier, Ezra the scribe had departed with numerous Jews to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah had thought the rebuilding was well on its way. Now he heard the work had stopped and was unlikely to start up again soon.

Powerful enemies were hindering the construction. A real possibility existed that Jerusalem might never be rebuilt. With hostile neighbors poised to destroy what remained of the city, including the temple, it could eventually cease from existence altogether. Nehemiah wondered, Would God permit Jerusalem to cease from existence?

What did he do next? “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).

In an emotional entreaty, he reminded God of His promise not to let Jerusalem perish and asked for help so his plan to go to Jerusalem with the king’s permission would succeed. His humble, heartfelt plea would be heard, and God would come to his aid.

Nehemiah’s prayer contains several important principles we can apply in our prayers. First, he presented himself respectfully before God. He did not begin by asking anything for himself. He came humbly before God and praised Him.

Next he confessed his negligence and imperfections and those of his people. Then he reminded God of His mercy and favor toward those who repent and obey Him.

Finally, he offered a petition that was according to the will of God. He asked for favor in the eyes of the head of state so he could go to Jerusalem and help rebuild the walls and the government.

Months of prayer and preparation

Some four months later, Nehemiah writes: “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” (Nehemiah 2:1). The king asked Nehemiah why he looked so sad.

Although Nehemiah recognized the possibility of risk to his life, he was confident. Four months of prayer and preparation had led to this moment, and he had a few seconds to speak and find favor with his majesty. He said, “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 burdened with fire?” (verse 3).

Relieved to know Nehemiah’s sad demeanor was not because of a plot against his life or a personal insult, the king permitted Nehemiah to speak. “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’ tombs, that I may rebuild it.” The king asked Nehemiah how long the task would take and when he would return, then gave Nehemiah permission to go (verses 5-6).

Nehemiah had cleared the first hurdle with the help of prayer and diligent preparation to do God’s work. Notice this principle of faith. When he petitioned the king, he had prepared beforehand all the details to help him accomplish the task.

He knew he had only one chance to present the whole case before this busy ruler. He realized that, to carry out the job, he would need a travel permit, an escort of armed men, the king’s written permission to rebuild and the authority as governor to make use of wood from the royal forest near Jerusalem. He was so diligent in his preparation that he had learned even the name of the person in charge of the forest (verses 7-8).

So Nehemiah, out of love for God and His people, willingly left the comfortable court life behind and as the new governor headed with a select few toward his troubled land 1,000 miles away. More than two months later he arrived at the devastation that was once Jerusalem and assumed duties as its governor.

Developing a strategy

The Jews must have looked curiously at this Persian official of Jewish background who arrived with an armed escort. They probably thought he would exploit them, as had others in their long line of governors. As a diplomat and a man accustomed to court intrigues, Nehemiah said as little as possible of his plans to rebuild, since he knew enemies and spies were sure to hear him.

As part of his strategy, he “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” (verse 13).

Nehemiah was disheartened to see the destruction. At that moment Jerusalem looked to be the most insignificant and pathetic place in the Persian Empire. After Nehemiah sized up the situation, God inspired him to devise an ambitious plan to rebuild.

The next day he gathered the Jewish officials and said: "'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" (verses 17-18).

The opposition did not sit idly by. "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Gershem the Arab heard of it, they laughed us to scorn 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'" (verses 19-20). Nehemiah's bold response so shocked them that they kept a low profile for a while.

Nehemiah divided up the work to be done, assigning portions of the project to various families. Nehemiah assigned the wall and the gate near the temple to the family of the high priest, Eliashib. In this way, Nehemiah gave the high priest and his kinsmen the honor of building the section with the sheep gate, which led to the temple. How proud they must have felt to build part of the wall of God's city that would become a lasting monument to their household.

Chapter 3 of the book of Nehemiah deals with the assignments he gave to the families of the various parts of the wall. For thousands of years their names have appeared in the Bible as a tribute to their labor.

Combating old and new enemies

Keep in mind that Nehemiah led by example; he also had a section to build. Imagine the governor carrying heavy beams and pieces of stonework. "So we labored in the work . . . 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" (Nehemiah 4:21, 23). How encouraging it must have been for the people to see this high-ranking official lugging stones and helping defend the city!

Work began enthusiastically, but old and new adversaries, including Sanballat, began to ridicule the Jews' efforts. Before his brethren and the army of Samaria, Sanballat mockingly 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?" (verse 2).

How did Nehemiah respond? Again he prayed and acted. "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! . . . For they have provoked You to anger before the builders" (verses 4-5).

For some time afterward they made such progress that their enemies "conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion" (verse 8). What did Nehemiah do? He prayed and acted. "Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night" (verse 9). Nehemiah knew that praying and then hoping for a miracle wouldn't be enough.

Nehemiah gathered the leaders and inspired them to courage and faith: "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" (verse 14). They continued building, with half the men working on the wall and half standing guard, armed with spears to keep their enemies at bay (verse 16).

Confronting oppressors

You would think that now everything would go more smoothly. However, successive crises continued to befall the people. A famine had ravished the land, and many had gone in debt to feed their families. Now they cried out when they couldn't borrow any more. Their fields and homes were being confiscated, and their children were being sold as slaves (Nehemiah 5:4-5).

The situation had become explosive. If Nehemiah mishandled the problem, the poorer people could likely revolt against the more wealthy and thus destroy their national unity and the rebuilding project. Nehemiah could have sided with the rich and influential and simply beat the people down by force of arms. But, since he truly feared God, he would not act this way.

Instead, here is what he did: "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" (verses 6-7).

"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? I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury!'" (verses 9-10). "So they said, 'We will

restore it, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say' . . . Then the people did according to this promise" (verses 12-13).

Again, Nehemiah led by his example. He was willing to freely lend to the poor, and he refused the taxes and foodstuffs that should have gone to him as governor. He even took it on himself to feed 150 of his countrymen (verse 17). In other words, Nehemiah was in effect paying a great portion of these expenses out of his own pocket. No wonder he had the respect and inspired the cooperation of his charges. Meanwhile, work continued on the wall.

Nehemiah faces dirty-tricks campaign

Since a direct attack against Jerusalem was now virtually impossible, Nehemiah's adversaries decided to try to assassinate him. They invited him to peace talks on the border between Judah and Samaria. Nehemiah adroitly excused himself from attendance and wrote them: "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?" (Nehemiah 6:3).

Foiled again, the enemy now tried to incriminate him in the eyes of the Persians, imputing rebellious motives for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (verses 6-7).

How did Nehemiah deal with this misinformation? Did he cringe in fear at the idea his king would demote him and would come to destroy Jerusalem? Did he try to work out a secret agreement with the enemy?

No. He simply prayed and acted. He denied the charges and trusted God to protect him. "Then I sent to [Sanballat] 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" (verses 8-9).

Nehemiah's enemies were persistent. Since Nehemiah would not come to them, they decided to come to him. They now conspired to ruin his reputation. They apparently intended to trick him into committing a sacrilege through enticing him to enter the very temple of God.

But Nehemiah was on his toes. His intelligence agents had warned him of an informer in the Jews' midst. The double agent, Shemaiah, came to Nehemiah claiming that God had revealed to him an assassination attempt against Nehemiah and urged him to hide in the temple. Flight to the temple appeared to be a reasonable suggestion; the temple was the safest place in Jerusalem.

But Nehemiah, remembering the intelligence report and realizing Shemaiah was trying to set a trap, 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!" (verse 11).

By showing fear in the face of danger, Nehemiah could have disheartened those who had been inspired by his valor. By entering the temple, Nehemiah would also have been disobeying God, because only the Levites were permitted by God's law to enter the temple.

Again Nehemiah prayed for protection from his enemies. "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" (verse 14).

A city reborn from devastation

Thanks to Nehemiah's courage, the work on the walls continued without delay. Incredibly, in less than two months the wall was repaired. "And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God" (verse 16).

Notice the humility and modesty of Nehemiah. He knew that God was in charge. God had enabled Nehemiah to complete this work, so he gave God all the glory. As a man of faith, he had done everything possible on his part and then had relied on God to do the rest.

Finally, after nearly 150 years, Jerusalem was a city again, well fortified and respected by surrounding nations. But Nehemiah's problems were not over. He had to deal with additional threatening letters from his enemies. Now, however, they could do little with the city so well protected.

Spiritual restoration and rejuvenation

Nehemiah also turned his attention to rebuilding the spiritual foundation of the city. "Then my God put it into my heart to gather the nobles, the rulers, and the people, that they might be registered by genealogy . . . Altogether the whole congregation was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty . . . Some of the heads of the fathers' houses gave to the treasury of the work . . ." (Nehemiah 7:5, 66, 71).

In this manner, Nehemiah set up the priests, gatekeepers, singers and other people inside Jerusalem, and he reestablished the tithe, which had been neglected, to sustain the priesthood.

With these people in place, the Jews celebrated the feasts of God under the spiritual guidance of Nehemiah and Ezra the scribe. Not only was the physical part of Jerusalem restored, but now came a spiritual restoration of the people, thanks largely to the example of Nehemiah and Ezra, who feared God and obeyed His laws.

Now there was respect again for God's laws and feasts. "So the whole congregation of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths [for the Feast of Tabernacles]; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was great gladness" (Nehemiah 8:17).

As the Jews grew spiritually in God's sight by keeping His Feasts, they also grew in understanding of God's will. They saw more clearly their sins and neglect. They solemnly vowed to once again keep the Sabbath holy and not indulge in marriages with their pagan neighbors. They resolved to tithe faithfully.

They even signed an agreement "to walk in God's Law . . . and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes." They further promised to structure their society on the foundation of God's laws (Nehemiah 10:28-39).

A leader who set the standard

Who was the first person to sign this pact before God? It was Nehemiah. He knew he should set the example and not be the last one in line (Nehemiah 10:1).

This was such an important pact in the history of God's people that it inspired a lasting spiritual revolution. From that time, many of God's people would faithfully keep the Sabbath and the feasts, tithe and refrain from mingling with pagan nations.

That is why, nearly 400 years later, when Christ set up His Church, there existed Jews who were still keeping God's laws—even though the Jews had backslid many times in those four centuries.

The physical work of rebuilding the walls and restructuring their society was complete, but then came another formidable task: repopulating the city.

Nehemiah first named competent administrators to serve the city, then by lot chose some to move back into Jerusalem. One out of every 10 households gave up its comfortable home outside the city and came to live in Jerusalem. "And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 11:2).

As the city was again filled with multitudes and additional building projects were well on their way, Nehemiah realized it was time for him to leave. Now he could go back to the king's side as his trusted cupbearer. Yet, as a good example and man of faith, he did not forget his people. He kept in touch.

The mice will play

As soon as he had left Jerusalem, however, a power struggle took place. As he learned later, the high priest, Eliashib, allowed one of Nehemiah's worst enemies and an ally of the Samaritans, Tobiah, to take up a privileged office in the temple precincts. Soon God's people were again neglecting His laws (Nehemiah 13:4).

With this influence, the Jews began socializing again with the Samaritans. They quit tithing; they ignored the Sabbath. So Nehemiah made the difficult and frustrating journey back to Jerusalem.

"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. 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. So I contended with the rulers, and said, 'Why is the house of God forsaken?' . . . Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse" (verses 6-12).

Why did Nehemiah so fervently and diligently serve God? Did he plan his actions so he could be seen of men? No. As Nehemiah explained in his prayer: "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!" (verse 14).

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he saw the people working on the Sabbath. "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 . . . And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions” (verse 15).

Again he prayed and acted. He assigned guards to the wall to ensure that no one would work or do business on the Sabbath. He prayed, “Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!” (verse 22). Nehemiah well understood the principle, later expressed by James, that faith without accompanying works is useless: “Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? . . . You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only” (James 2:22, 24).

Solving one final problem

Nehemiah ends his incredible account by tackling one last problem, that of marriages between Jews and pagans, of the people of God socializing and marrying into families that worshiped false gods. His zeal as a right example of obedience to God never faltered. “So I contended with them . . . , saying, ‘You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves . . . Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan . . .’” (Nehemiah 13:25, 30).

After a bountiful life filled with faith, Nehemiah ends his remarkable life story by asking God to do what all of us would surely ask for: “Remember me, O my God, for good.” *GN*

Sidebar: The Trusted Cupbearer

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia explains why a cupbearer was such an important official in the royal courts of antiquity. A cupbearer was “an officer of high rank at ancient courts, whose duty it was to serve the wine at the king’s table. On account of the constant fear of plots and intrigues, a person must be regarded as thoroughly trustworthy to hold this position. He must guard against poison in the king’s cup, and was sometimes required to swallow some of the wine before serving it. His confidential relations with the king often endeared him to his sovereign and also gave him a position of great influence” (Vol. 1, p. 837).

A century ago, archaeologists discovered an Assyrian list of salaries paid to high-ranking officers. In that land the cupbearer received the fourth-highest salary in the kingdom, above even that of the justice of the highest court of that day.

Nehemiah was one of the many lines of distinguished Jews who held high governmental positions. Before him were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego in the Babylonian period. In the Persian era, Daniel again became a counselor of King Darius (Daniel 6:1-2). Afterwards came Mordecai and Queen Esther. So we should not be surprised to find a little later that Nehemiah was a cupbearer for a Persian king. *GN*

Sidebar: Building Relationships

How did Nehemiah accomplish the Herculean task of rebuilding Jerusalem when other governors had failed? As a leader, he knew how to encourage and instill confidence in others to get the job done. The biblical account shows how Nehemiah inspired his helpers.

First, he identified himself with the people and included himself in the task. He did not just order them to build the wall under his arbitrary authority. He became one of them. He used the word we repeatedly instead of you. He let them know he was not there to take advantage of the people.

Once he had gained their trust and confidence, he revealed his ambitious plan and let them know that the building materials were already at hand. The people were favorably impressed.

Next, Nehemiah told the people of the miracles God had performed thus far in this work. Now the people knew they had a leader filled with living faith. As a result, the people were filled with faith and enthusiasm.

He then divided the work into small sections. He wisely delegated a part of the project to each clan, or family. In this way, a job that appeared impossible was now broken down into manageable sections. He carefully reviewed the available manpower and handed the most experienced and qualified laborers the most difficult tasks. Instead of a boring and tiring job, the work now became an exciting challenge.

As a result of his dynamic leadership, the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls was completed in less than two months, and the city was again protected from its enemies. *GN*

Introduction to Malachi (Malachi 1)

January 22-23

As the last of the 12 Minor Prophets, which together make up the final book of the Prophets division of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Malachi brings the Prophets to a close. The Jewish Talmud and scholarly consensus place the book during Judah’s post-Exilic period under Persian rule, following

a religious lapse some time after the restoration of the temple worship system during the days of Haggai and Zechariah. However, the book's exact placement within this period is uncertain.

Some scholars date the book to the first half of the fifth century B.C., around 490-460 B.C., prior to Ezra's 457 B.C. arrival and reforms. Others see it set around 450, after a lapse in following Ezra's spiritual revival and shortly before the arrival of Nehemiah in 444. It is worth noting that during his term as governor, Nehemiah dealt with several problems addressed in the book of Malachi: marriages to foreign women, failure to pay tithes, Sabbath breaking, priestly corruption, and injustice. However, as Ezra had earlier dealt with the problem of intermarriage, it seems likely that the other problems were around earlier as well. That the book of Malachi was not written during Ezra or Nehemiah's governorship seems clear from the implication of Malachi 1:8—that the person serving as governor expected personal tribute. Recall Nehemiah's statement in Nehemiah 5:14-15: "Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah...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." Ezra had the same fear of God, and Nehemiah's mention of former governors surely did not include him. *The New Bible Commentary* suggests: "In v. 8 the governor could be the governor in Samaria [who ruled over Judea prior to Nehemiah's arrival], and the point is that the priests were bringing offerings to the altar which they would not dare present to the civil ruler" (note on verse 8).

Many have suggested that the book should be dated to the period of Nehemiah's absence starting around 432 B.C.—when he returned for a time to the court of Persia and national corruption set in back home (see Nehemiah 13:6). However, Nehemiah would likely have left his trusted brother Hanani as interim governor while he was away, which seems to argue against this period based on Malachi 1:8. Other scholars would put the book after Nehemiah's time, in the later 400s B.C. (which would mean that the problems Nehemiah dealt with resurfaced and that the scriptural account leaves them unresolved). Again, however, as mentioned in the Bible Reading Program comments on Nehemiah 6:1-7:3, it appears from archaeological evidence that after Nehemiah's second term his brother succeeded him as governor.

This leaves the first two dates as more likely—sometime before Ezra's arrival or shortly before Nehemiah's arrival. Since the issue is uncertain, we are reading Malachi after Ezra and Nehemiah even though it may well fit earlier chronologically.

Even more unclear than the exact dating of the book is its author. Just who is the prophet Malachi? Malachi may not even have been his actual name, as it means "My Messenger"—so that verse 1 could properly be rendered, "The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by My Messenger." Indeed, the "messenger" of the Lord turns out to be a major theme of the book. A priest, it explains, is supposed to serve in this role (2:7). Yet the priesthood is rebuked for failing in this responsibility. Malachi prophesies that God would send a particular messenger—"My Messenger" (*malachi* in Hebrew), God calls him—who would prepare the way for the "Messenger of the covenant" (3:1). The New Testament explains this as John the Baptist preparing for the coming of Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27).

In its introductory note on authorship, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* states: "The suggestion that 'Malachi' is not a proper name but a title has ancient support in the [Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament], which reads 'his messenger.' To complicate the matter, the Targum [or Aramaic paraphrase] of Jonathan added after 'Malachi' the words 'whose name was Ezra the scribe.' [The Latin translator] Jerome concurred with this. In the Talmud (*Megillah* 15a) Mordecai [of the book of Esther] is credited with writing the Book of Malachi. Some scholars deny that Malachi is a separate book but affirm that it is actually only the last of three sections of Zechariah, which were cut off in order to make the Minor Prophets amount to the sacred number twelve. Though [the first-century Jewish historian] Josephus mentioned all the major characters of this period, he failed to include Malachi among them. The total obscurity of the author of the book is underlined by the absence of the name Malachi in all the rest of the Bible. Even where he is quoted in the N[ew] T[estament], his name does not appear (Matt 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27).

"On the positive side, each of the other writing prophets is named in the opening verses of his book. If a man named Malachi did not write the book bearing this name, he would be the only exception. Moreover, Malachi is neither an unlikely name nor an unsuitable one for the author of this last book of the prophets. After all, Malachi was the Lord's messenger. His trumpet made no uncertain sound. Clearly and unmistakably he indicted his people and the priests for their sin and summoned them to righteousness."

With the priesthood failing in its job, this man stood in the gap, proclaiming God's Word and law as God's faithful messenger. He exhorted the nation to faithful service and to heartfelt sincerity in that service. Whoever Malachi was, he served as a precursor to the messenger of Malachi 3:1 who would prepare the way before the coming of the Lord. This figure is referred to in 4:5 as "Elijah the prophet." Again, the New Testament identifies this figure with John the Baptist, who came on the scene during a period of spiritual letdown among the religious leadership and the people as a whole, preparing people for the first coming of Jesus. Yet Jesus explained that there would be an Elijah still to come (Matthew 17:11)—evidently to prepare the way before His *second* coming. The work of this later messenger would also occur during a period of national spiritual decline. The book of Malachi is therefore quite pertinent to the time of the end and to the message the people of God are to proclaim. Note that chapters 3 and 4 refer to the end-time Day of the Lord (see 3:2; 4:1-6).

The book of Malachi is a message to "Israel" (1:1). On one level, this meant the book was addressed to the postexilic Jews of Judea. They are referred to in Scripture as Israel because they were the remnant of the covenant nation. (The later Jewish independent state under the Maccabees was actually named Israel.) Yet given the clear end-time focus in the book, Israel here may well also refer to the modern nations descended from ancient Israel, including the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the nations of Northwest Europe and the Jewish state of Israel. Furthermore, on another level, the prophecy is also directed to the people of *spiritual* Israel—the Church of God.

Chosen but Unacceptable (Malachi 1)

January 24-25

God's message begins with a declaration of His love for His people. Yet they are quick to challenge this love, asking, "In what way have You loved us?" (verse 2). Whether or not this sentiment is actually voiced is not clear. It may just be that God knows the people think this way. The Lord's reestablishment of the nation in the Promised Land should have served as a testimony to His faithfulness. And the deliverance of the Jews throughout the Persian Empire at the time of Esther was clearly miraculous. Yet the people in Judea had experienced many problems.

The time frame here may have been prior to or shortly after Ezra's arrival—after many years of letting down in following God's laws and, as a result, a withholding of blessings. Or it may have been several years later, after a halt in Jewish rebuilding due to neighboring resistance (see Ezra 4:7-23). A time soon after Nehemiah's successful reconstruction of Jerusalem's wall does not seem to fit. But it could well be that not long afterward the same doleful self-pity gripped the people again.

Indeed, we should recall the awesome events of Israel's Exodus from Egypt. The people went out with a high hand and experienced the incredible and miraculous Red Sea crossing. Yet it was not long at all before they began to complain against God, even accusing Him of bringing them out to the desert to kill them. People often have a short memory when it comes to God's blessings. When things become uncomfortable or when mere boredom sets in, there is a tendency to forget all about the wonderful ways God has helped us and about the wonderful destiny He has in store for us. We today are not immune to such thinking and need to combat it. One way is by regularly pondering the myriad things God has done for us, which helps us to place our trust in His great promises.

God is very patient in His response. He presents the contrast with Esau to exemplify His commitment to His people. Esau and Jacob were fraternal twin brothers, both of the line of Abraham. As the elder twin, Esau (also known as Edom), was in line to inherit the family birthright blessings. But he sold them to Jacob for a bowl of stew. While Jacob connived to obtain the blessings in this and a later episode, he at least saw the blessings as valuable. Esau sold the birthright away for almost nothing, basically showing contempt for what God gave—a bad example that Christians are warned against (Hebrews 12:16-17). God chose Jacob (later renamed Israel) and his descendants as His people and rejected Esau. The descendants of Esau, the Edomites, became Israel's constant enemy. Throughout the prophets, God declared that the people of Edom would suffer severe judgment for their terrible and ongoing hostility. And here He does so again.

God says He has "loved" Jacob and "hated" Esau (verses 2-3)—referring also to their descendants. This may well seem odd, given that Jesus taught us to love even our enemies as part of what it means to have godly character. "Hate" in Scripture sometimes has the hyperbolic meaning of "love less by comparison." Yet in this case it appears more concerned with God choosing the one as His people and rejecting the other. *The Bible Reader's Companion* says that "'hated' here is used as a legal term, meaning the decisive rejection of a claim" (Lawrence Richards, 1991, note on verses 2-5). The apostle Paul quoted this passage in Romans 9:13 to illustrate his point about God's prerogative to choose whomever He wants as His people. Yet we understand from other verses that God ultimately intends to call all people—though not all in this present life.

(Few Bible students realize that Jesus spoke of bringing people back to life to give them a chance at salvation—a chance they did not have before. For more information on this little understood truth, see our booklets, *What Happens After Death?*, *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?* and *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*.)

God next refers to judgment that has befallen Edom—national destruction and impoverishment (Malachi 1:3-4). While it was true that God’s people had suffered these things at the hands of the Babylonians, the Edomites evidently did not escape either. And it would yet be worse for the Edomites. God had many times promised to restore Israel and Judah—and had taken powerful steps in that direction with the reestablishment of the Jewish nation in the Promised Land. But this was not to be the case with Edom. Instead, while the Edomites would attempt to regain what they had lost, God would not permit it (verses 4-5). The prophecy against Edom here seems to stretch into the last days, as in other prophecies. God’s indignation against Esau lasting “forever” in verse 4 probably means that the judgment continues as long as the conditions under which it is given exist—that is, as long as Esau exists as a nation. Moreover, given Paul’s example above, Jacob here could also represent all those called of God while Esau could signify the rest of mankind, which is presently rejected. Eventually, all gentile peoples must become part of the covenant nation Israel in order to have a relationship with God and escape perpetual indignation.

Despite His clear providential care for His people, God then points out that He is receiving neither the honor due Him as the nation’s Father nor the reverence due Him as the people’s true Lord and Master. Worse, this message is specifically directed not to the common people but to the priests (verse 6), who were supposed to be teaching the people God’s ways and leading by godly example. While the priesthood of the fifth century B.C. was surely in mind, this message was likely intended for later times as well—continuing through the entire second temple period as problems resurfaced. While the prophecy is directed to the descendants of Levi, as chapter 2 makes clear, the priests here may on some level, in a modern context, symbolize the religious teachers of the nation in general and perhaps even represent some among the ministry of the true Church—*spiritual Levites*, so to speak.

Instead of honoring Him, God says the priests are actually despising His name. In an ancient context, one’s name signified all that he was and stood for. Again, the insolent retort comes: “In what way...?” (verse 6). God says the priests are offering defiled food on His altar—which means they are treating Him in a defiling way—to which they yet again respond with, “In what way...?” (verse 7). God explains that they show contempt for Him in the offering of blemished sacrifices. People were supposed to present their best to God when giving offerings (see Leviticus 1:3). Offerings were not to be blemished or unclean (7:19-21; Deuteronomy 15:21). Even their human rulers would not accept such tribute, probably referring to taxation by Persian overlords (compare Malachi 1:8). Yet God is a “great King” (verse 14). Indeed, He is the King of all kings—the infinite and almighty Creator. “We can apply Malachi’s test today. If we would be embarrassed to offer what we intend to give to God or do for Him to a person that we respect, our offering is unworthy of the Lord” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verse 8). Furthermore, consider that a sacrifice of something with little or no value to the one offering it is really no sacrifice at all.

Verse 9 in the New King James Version is better understood with the following bracketed insert: “But now [if you] entreat God’s favor that He may be gracious to us, while this is being done by your hands, will He accept you favorably?” (compare Moffatt Translation; New American Bible). The answer is obviously no (see verse 10).

Verse 11 looks forward to the future when God’s name would be honored with proper prayerful praise and offerings—even by the gentiles. This perhaps foresees in small part the spiritual sacrifices of the people of God’s Church today, yet God’s name being truly great among the nations is more directly applicable to the time when His Kingdom will be set up on the earth after Jesus Christ’s return.

But for now, here were God’s own people—His own priesthood in fact—profaning His name by their unholy attitude and service. Instead of having an attitude of humility and regarding God with awe, they had an arrogant attitude and regarded Him with contempt. These religious leaders view their duties as mere wearisome toil (verse 13). “Malachi put into words the thoughts of the priests. For them the holy service of God had become a bore, a labor of duty rather than of love, a yoke around their necks. The very men who were the mediators between God and his people (Exod 28:1, 43), the teachers of Israel (Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10; 2 Chronicles 15:3), and the court of appeal (Deut 19:17-19) were, by their own choice, profaning their office and bringing shame on the name of Yahweh” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on Malachi 1:12-13).

Applying this prophetic message to today, we must give our best to God. While there are no longer animal sacrifices today, each of us is literally a “living sacrifice” and our service must be “acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). We must not become casual or sloppy in matters such as keeping God’s Sabbath, in tithing, in our commitment to the Church’s work of preaching the gospel and in modeling God’s way of life every day. There are some for whom participating in worship services and even typical Christian responsibilities such as prayer and helping others become tiresome chores. When the time comes for Sabbath services, we must make sure our attitude is not one of, “Oh, no, not church again.” For indeed, God looks on all His people as a special, chosen priesthood (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Are we fulfilling our spiritual duties with proper care and reverence? Do we give God our best, or are we just going through the motions?

There is an even stronger application to those who have the responsibility of preaching and teaching God’s Word. Those called to the ministry must not wilt in their dedication to first living and then teaching it accurately. Their example and their message must be compelling, as they serve Christ. When they fail to do so, their bad example will over time infect the congregants as well. Let us all take to heart the criticism God levels in this opening chapter of Malachi and examine ourselves accordingly.

The next chapter pronounces judgment on the priests for profaning their office and leading others astray.

“You Have Corrupted the Covenant of Levi” (Malachi 2:1-16)

January 26-27

Continuing on from the previous chapter, God warns the priests that even though they are part of His blessed chosen people, if they refuse to repent of their wrong attitude and behavior, He will curse their blessings. Indeed, He says He has already done so (verse 2)—showing that some of the problems the nation was facing were really their fault (despite the people’s insinuation in 1:2 that God was unfaithful to His covenant, failing to bless as He promised).

The “refuse” of 2:3 was the “offal” (NIV) or “dung” (KJV) still within sacrificial animals that should have been removed and taken outside the community prior to sacrificing. It may be that, in their careless attitude toward their duties, the priests were not removing it. In any case, they were certainly not removing the *spiritual* filth from *themselves*. So God threatens that this disgusting uncleanness will mark their faces so that they and their corrupt descendants, like such refuse, will be taken away and disposed of.

In verses 3-4, we see that God’s judgment is intended for the positive effect of restoring His relationship with the priests. He recalls here His “covenant with Levi.” The actual person Levi, the son of Jacob, was not in mind here. Rather Levi’s descendants collectively, the *tribe* of Levi, is meant—despite the use of the pronouns “him” and “he.” The Levites were chosen for special divine service after their stand with Moses following the golden calf incident. Moses himself was a Levite. And from Moses’ brother Aaron sprang the line of the nation’s priesthood. So all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests, the other Levitical sub-tribes having other responsibilities in God’s service. Some see the covenant with Levi as a reference to the provisions of Numbers 3:45-48 and 18:21-24. God refers to it as a covenant “of life and peace,” which seems to refer to what God said of Aaron’s son Phinehas: “Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel” (Numbers 25:12-13). God also refers to His unbreakable covenant with the Levites in Jeremiah 33:19-22.

Verses 4-7 give an idealized vision of how the priesthood should be. It appears from this passage that in the early days there were times when the priests did perform their duties as they should have and with the right attitude. No doubt others through the centuries shared the convictions of Phinehas. But the ideal here was a far cry from the general picture of things when the book of Malachi was written.

The priests were to proclaim God’s truth and law to the people, each serving as God’s “messenger” (verses 6-7)—this word pointing back to the name of the book (as the book’s author is fulfilling this responsibility that the priests ought to have been carrying out). Yet instead of turning people to the law and away from sin, the priests here are leading people to *stumble over* the law—that is, to sin! (verse 8). This is an atrocious and appalling situation, and God says He will bring these leaders down in humiliation. In the New Testament we are warned, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1).

Breaking Up the National Family (Malachi 2:1-16)**Jan. 26-27 Cont'd**

The book of Malachi next addresses a problem with the nation as a whole (see verse 11)—the issue of intermarriage with neighboring pagans and men divorcing their first wives.

Malachi first refers to all having one father and one God (verse 10). One father could refer to Abraham or Jacob as a common ancestor. But as God declared Himself the nation's Father in 1:6, He seems to be the One referred to. The point is that the nation is a family with a common system of values and that those who are part of this family should treat each other with the care and respect one would expect in a proper family relationship.

But the people of Judah have violated the sanctity of the national family "home." For one, they have "married the daughter of a foreign god" (verse 11). God had repeatedly warned Israel and Judah against intermarriage with pagans as these could influence His people into pagan false worship. Those who, knowing better, betrayed God in this way yet still persisted in forms of true worship were an utter affront to Him—and would be cut off from the nation either through death or expulsion (verse 12).

If this were not bad enough, God accuses them of making a great hypocritical show of repentance (verse 13). He informs them that He will not accept such worship. Once more, the people give an impudent retort—feigning as if they can't understand what the problem is: "For what reason?" (verse 14). God then calls them to account. Not only had the men of the nation married foreign wives, but they had evidently *divorced* their first wives in the process. "The reference to 'wife of your youth' in this verse suggests that the men were divorcing their aging wives in favor of younger women" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verse 14).

This callous betrayal wrought terrible evil throughout the land. Broken homes made a mess of families and served to rip the nation apart in countless ways—made worse by the introduction of a pagan value system to influence the next generation. In verse 15, God explains that in marriage two spouses are to become one—unified in mind and values, as well as in flesh so as to procreate. And the relationship is supposed to last until death separates them. This spiritually healthy environment enables the upbringing of godly children. Indeed, society is built on the foundation of the family. When families are devastated on a wide scale, a society's downfall is not far off.

In verse 16, God states unequivocally that He *hates* divorce. Some translators see covering one's garment with violence in the verse as a separate reference—that is, that God hates violence also. Yet it makes more sense in context to understand the verse as the New King James Version interprets it—that is to say, divorce itself does violence to people's lives. Indeed, note the reference to one's garment. Commentator Charles Feinberg explains: "The reference is to the old custom of putting a garment over a woman to claim her as wife. (Note particularly Deu[teronomy] 22:30; Ruth 3:9; and Eze[kiel] 16:8.) Instead of spreading their garment to protect their wives, they covered their garment with violence toward their wives. The garment symbolized wedded trust and protection" (*The Minor Prophets*, 1990, p. 258).

"Take heed to your spirit," or as some translations have it, "Guard your spirit," is a richly informative phrase, for unfaithfulness to the marriage covenant begins in the thoughts and impulses of the mind, and they in turn produce the actions that break up the marriage. Conversely, one remains faithful in marriage by ruling his thoughts. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

So this pointed counsel from God certainly still applies today in a culture filled with divorce. All of us should, as God says, take heed.

Two Messengers; Robbing God (Malachi 2:17–3:12)**January 28-29**

Regarding Malachi 2:17, Charles Feinberg states in his book *The Minor Prophets*: "The third offence of the ungodly in Israel was an evil skepticism. By their ungodliness and unbelief they had wearied God; they had exhausted his patience [and still they again are quick to retort with "In what way...?"]. They brought forward the old argument against the providence of God from the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. They had endured so many trials in exilic and postexilic times, that they were ready to believe that God delighted in and favored the cause of the wicked, the heathen who enjoyed prosperity, over against the ungodly.

"They complained that God did not judge wickedness severely enough. And if such were not the case, where indeed is the God of justice of whom they heard continually. Many connect this verse with the next chapter (and it is related in thought), because the answer to 2:17 is found in 3:1 [or,

rather, starts in 3:1 and continues through chapter 4 in the description of the coming Day of the Lord]. God never fails to answer such a question put forth in such skeptical spirit. It rounded out the tale of their misdeeds and revealed them to be ripe for judgment” (pp. 258-259).

In Malachi 3:1, God says, “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.” The beginning of this verse could also be translated as “Behold, I send Malachi...” Certainly, the work of Malachi, God’s messenger, was one of preparing the people for the coming of God—and His work continues even today, for his words are so preparing us who read and respond to them. Yet the reference, as the New Testament explains, was more directly to another, John the Baptist (Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27). The “Lord” whom the people sought was the long-promised Messiah. As the temple is said to be “His,” we should understand Him to be the very God who was worshiped in it. Yet He Himself is also referred to as a messenger, having been *sent* by God the Father. He would come as “the Messenger of the covenant.” He had presented the various covenants of the Old Testament, yet this probably refers to His coming to mediate the *New Covenant*.

“The phrase ‘whom you [seek or] desire’ [NIV] is interesting. Even in their sin, suggests 2:17, the people longed for deliverance through the Messiah. Amos, too, had people in his audience who ‘desired’ the Day of the Lord; but he bluntly told them that the Day of the Lord would be darkness and not light (Amos 5:19-20). So, too, Malachi asked in 3:2, ‘Who can endure the day of his coming?’ The coming Messiah would bring judgment—viz., vindication and exoneration for the righteous but condemnation and punishment for the wicked” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 1).

The question “But who can endure the day of His coming?” recalls Joel 2:11: “For the day of the LORD [i.e., God] is great and very terrible; who can endure it?” This again identifies the messianic Messenger as being God. In this context, the question “Who can stand when He appears?”—essentially repeated in Revelation 6:17—also very clearly points to the coming of God. The likening of the Messenger to a refiner’s fire and launderer’s soap (Malachi 3:2) shows Him to be a purifier of His people. The reference to His being a refiner and purifier of silver, purging the sons of Levi so that they may offer acceptable offerings, recalls Isaiah 1, where God decried Israel’s unacceptable worship and offerings (verses 10-15) and proclaimed, “Your silver has become dross.... I will turn My hand against you, and thoroughly purge away your dross” (verses 22, 25).

In Malachi 3:5, the word translated “judgment” is probably better rendered “justice” here. That is, God will set the nation on the right track again and then actively intervene to righteously deal with those who don’t follow His laws. Again, this is in answer to the issue of 2:17, where God is accused of rewarding evil.

Malachi 3:6 provides great comfort. God is not fickle. His character is always constant. It is because of this that the people of Israel, both physical and spiritual, are not consumed. Though they often deserve to be destroyed for their sins, God’s great mercy and compassion, as well as the working out of His plan and purpose, are unswerving.

But God’s faithfulness has not been returned in kind. So He encourages the people to “return”—that is, repent. Yet they don’t see the need, now asking, “In what way shall we return?” (verse 7). God then gives them an example of their disobedience—stating that they have robbed Him. “In what way...?” they come back with again (verse 8). Then He makes clear that the issue is their failure to tithe and give offerings.

Holding back from God what rightfully belongs to Him amounts to stealing. This brought the people of Malachi’s day under a curse. The modern nations descended from ancient Israel experience this curse even still. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* notes: “Most churches still fall under this indictment [of robbing God]; their budgets are generally nowhere near 10 percent of the income of the members” (note on verse 9). And God’s tithing law applies to all, not only to those who choose to attend church.

If people complied with God’s laws in this regard, they would be greatly blessed. After paying tithes and giving offerings, God would help their remaining income stretch to cover all their needs and more. They would experience no lack of provisions. And there would be many tangible and intangible blessings besides (verses 10-12). Indeed, God told the people of Malachi’s day—and all people since, including us—to *test* Him in this matter (verse 10). God will demonstrate His faithfulness by keeping His promise. We, of course, must make sure we are remaining faithful to Him.

The Righteous Spared, the Wicked Destroyed (Malachi 3:13–4:6)

January 30-31

In Malachi 3:13-15, we again see the people having the attitude expressed in 2:17—that God rewards evil and punishes righteousness. But as the rest of chapter 3 and chapter 4 show, this notion

is utterly false. The righteous will ultimately receive great reward. And those who persist in wickedness will be destroyed.

God presents the righteous, those with a proper fear of Him, in verse 16. Here it says that they “spoke to one another”—demonstrating the regular fellowship and communication that God’s people are supposed to have with one another. God takes great interest in the fellowship of His people, listening to what they have to say. The implication of the end of the verse is that their conversation revolved around Him and His ways. And for their proper attitude and practice, God says that they are written up in a special book of remembrance before Him. He of course needs no records for recollection, so this is perhaps more for *our* encouragement. God further states that those who fear Him will be His special treasure and that they will be spared from destruction when it comes (verse 17).

God certainly draws a distinction between the righteous and the wicked—as the final outcome will make clear (verse 18).

Chapter 4 describes what will befall those who persist in rejecting God and His ways. They will be completely burned up and reduced to ashes (verses 1, 3), utterly annihilated during the reign of Christ (see also Matthew 10:28). This truth may surprise those who anticipate that the wicked will be tormented forever in a fire that never goes out. In spite of its widespread acceptance, that doctrine doesn’t come from the Bible. (For more information, request, download or read online our free booklet *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*).

Blessing is again promised to the faithful, for whom “the Sun of Righteousness will arise with healing in His wings” (verse 2). Many reject this as a messianic reference because the figure is not used in the New Testament. However, since the word “sun” here would seem to denote the *source* of righteousness, then God is most likely intended. It employs a simple metaphor, comparing the comforting warmth that the rising sun brings upon the cold earth to the comforting healing that the Messiah brings upon a world cut off from God. And His arising on the world to bring healing is certainly the mission of God the Son, Jesus Christ. As for healing in the wings, Christ is compared to “a bird whose comforting wings bring healing to the chicks that gather underneath (see Ps. 91:1-4)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Malachi 4:2). Jesus, Himself used this analogy in Matthew 23:37.

In verse 3 of Malachi 4, the righteous are shown to be ultimately victorious over the wicked.

The Coming Elijah (Malachi 3:13–4:6)

Jan. 30-31 Cont’d

In closing, the book’s message calls on readers to remember the law God gave through Moses (verse 4) and then describes the coming of Elijah in the future (verses 5-6). As stated in the Bible Reading Program’s introduction to Malachi, the New Testament shows that John the Baptist fulfilled this prophecy in part, preparing people for Jesus’ first coming. However, Jesus stated that another Elijah was still to come (Matthew 17:11)—apparently to prepare the way before Jesus’ *second* coming.

This Elijah, we are told, would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers lest God strike the earth with a curse—that is, wipe out its inhabitants. In an end-time setting, the people to be prepared are those being brought into the Church of God. So the mission here would seem to involve the building up of families—teaching parents the importance of loving and properly rearing their children as well as providing godly training for the Church’s young people, turning their hearts to their parents. Yet there may be more intended by the prophecy.

In the context of John the Baptist’s mission, turning the hearts of the children to the fathers is specifically interpreted in Luke 1 to mean turning “many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God” and turning “the disobedient to the wisdom of the just”—again, to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (verses 16-17). This may be why immediately before giving the Elijah prophecy in Malachi 4, God says to remember the law He gave through Moses (verse 4). It could be, then, that the “fathers” in the prophecy are the patriarchs and prophets, whose hearts’ desire was for their descendants to be blessed through obedience to God, which they taught. The coming Elijah would then direct the “hearts” (or hearts’ desire) of the patriarchal fathers to the children by proclaiming the wisdom and instruction of the fathers about obeying God to the disobedient *descendants* of Israel in his generation—as the original Elijah did in his day among the Northern Kingdom of Israel and as John the Baptist did in his day among the Jews of Judea. Thereby, the Elijah would in turn direct the hearts of many of these “children” to the “wisdom of the just”—to obeying God. This is the work that God’s Church is to be carrying out today, as it preaches the gospel to the entire world and cares for those whom God calls.

With the close of the book of Malachi, we come to the end of the Prophets section of the Old Testament. We turn next to the Writings section. Having already read many items from this section, we will pick up those we have missed.

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