

## STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

### **Introduction**

Nehemiah, while a cupbearer in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes I, heard that the walls around Jerusalem had been broken down. The king of Persia allowed Nehemiah to journey to Jerusalem in 445 B.C., and serve as governor. The walls were rebuilt (Neh.1-6), and true worship was restored (Neh.8-10), the city was repopulated and there were celebrations at the dedication of the wall (Neh.11-12), and later the renewal itself was renewed (Neh.13).

### **Nehemiah as a man of prayer (Neh.1)**

1. Who was Nehemiah? (1:1) Where was he? \_\_\_\_\_

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Susa was the winter resort of the Persian kings.

2. What news did he hear? (1:2-4) What would be the probable consequences of having the walls around a city destroyed?

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This must have been a recent blow rather than the destruction of 587 B.C. under Nebuchadnezzar. Perhaps some time just before 445 B.C. the walls - which were 3 or 4 kilometres long - had been broken down and the gates burned.

3. What was Nehemiah's response to this news? (1:4) What is this teaching us? What do you note about David in Psalm 122:6-9, and Ezekiel in Ezekiel 3:15, and Paul in 1 Thessalonians 3:8?

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*I love Thy Kingdom, Lord,  
The house of Thine abode,  
The Church our blest Redeemer saved  
With His own precious blood.*

*I love Thy Church, O God;  
Her walls before Thee stand,  
Dear as the apple of Thine eye,  
And graven on Thy hand.*

*For her my tears shall fall,  
For her my prayers ascend,  
To her my cares and toils be given,  
Till toils and cares shall end.*

(Timothy Dwight)

Martin Luther wrote that Erasmus compelled one 'to smile and jest on the subject of the faults and misfortunes of the Church of Christ, which, however it is every Christian's duty to deplore before God in deepest grief'.

4. What was the content of Nehemiah's prayer? (1:5-11) List some of its main characteristics, notably its exalted view of God (1:4-5, 11), its recognition of sin (1:6-7), and its acknowledgment of Scripture's authority (1:8 refers back to Deuteronomy 28:64; 1:9 goes back to Deuteronomy 30:1-4; and 1:10 echoes Deuteronomy 9:29).

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In C. S. Lewis' *Prince Caspian*, Lucy meets Aslan, and says, 'Aslan, you're bigger.' Aslan's reply is: 'That is because you are older, little one.' Lucy asks, 'Not because you are?' Aslan replies again, 'I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.'

5. What was Nehemiah's position at this stage? (1:11b)

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Being a cupbearer might sound like being in a job with short-term prospects but he often acted as an adviser to the monarch.

**Nehemiah as a man of action (Neh.2)**

1. What happened some 4-5 months after this? (2:1-3) Why was Nehemiah afraid? What did he tell the king?

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2. Why is the prayer in 2:4 often referred as an 'arrow prayer'? What can we learn from this?

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This is the prayer of the housewife dealing with a difficult child; the prayer of the Christian in the middle of an awkward conversation; the prayer of the pastor going from one patient in the hospital to another.

The man of action is a man of prayer first. Robert Dabney: 'The men who have changed the face of the world have been the reserved, the meditative; men of profound insight, wont to retire into the depths of their own consciousness; men who

receive the beautiful and the good with a poet's intense appreciation, and hold them with unwavering grasp of mind and heart.'

3. What did Nehemiah ask the king, Artaxerxes I? (2:5) How did the king respond? (2:6) \_\_\_\_\_

4. What else did Nehemiah ask for? (2:7-8) Is it ungodly to plan and to know the ways of the world? How did Nehemiah get to receive what he asked for?

5. Was it right for Nehemiah to use Persian protection? (2:9-10) Thirteen years earlier, in 458 B.C., Ezra did not use such protection (Ezra 8:21-23). Who was right - Nehemiah or Ezra? Can you think of examples today that might be somewhat parallel to this?

6. Why did Nehemiah inspect the wall? (2:11-16) Why did he do this at night? What lessons might we learn from this?

7. How was Nehemiah able to encourage the Jewish leaders in the work? (2:17-18)

9. How was Nehemiah able to stand up to jeering and ridicule? (2:19-20) How can his attitude help us?

**Building the wall (Neh.3)**

1. What takes place in Nehemiah 3? What overall impression do you get of the work? What do you note of the realistic touch in 3:5?

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**Opposition to the work (Neh.4)**

1. Look up a map first. Where did the opposition to the rebuilding of the wall come from? (4:1, 3, 7) \_\_\_\_\_

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2. How did Sanballat and Tobiah seek to intimidate Nehemiah? (4:2-3)

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Opposition to the work of God is rarely consistent. Here, they mock Judah for its weakness, but they fear its strength.

3. How did Nehemiah respond to these taunts? (4:4-5; see 6:14) Are Christians ever to pray like this? (note Rev.6:9-10)

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4. What stage did the project reach? (4:6) How was this able to be done?

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5. How did Sanballat and the other enemies of the cause respond to this? (4:7-8)

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6. What two things did Nehemiah do in response to this? (4:9) What can we learn from this in the work for the kingdom of God?

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Oliver Cromwell: 'Trust in the Lord and keep the powder dry.'

7. Eventually this opposition started to have an effect on the Jews. What was that effect? (4:10-12) Should we be surprised at opposition? (1 Pet.4:12) \_\_\_\_\_

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8. What did Nehemiah do to bolster morale and strengthen the cause? (4:13-14) Why is fear something that a Christian must seek to overcome? How can we overcome it?

9. What happened next? (4:15) \_\_\_\_\_

10. Why does Nehemiah use both sword and trowel to get the work done? (4:16-18)  
What is that teaching us? \_\_\_\_\_

11. What is said about the work and the number of available workers? (4:19-20)  
Why was a trumpet needed? (4:18-20) How does Nehemiah both plan and trust God?

12. What else did Nehemiah order to be done? (4:21-23) How does Nehemiah lead  
in verse 23?

John White: 'Spirituality is no substitute for sweat.'  
Nehemiah was a dirty, smelly, uncomfortable but inspiring example (1 Pet.5:3).

**Nehemiah as Governor (Neh.5)**

1. What is the outcry raised in verses 1-5? Should this have happened in Israel?  
(Lev.25:35-46) \_\_\_\_\_

2. What was Nehemiah's first response to this evil? (5:6)

3. What did he do next? (5:7-8) What did he point out? How did the guilty nobles  
and officials respond?

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4. To what motives does Nehemiah point in verse 9? Do we often appeal to these motives today? \_\_\_\_\_

5. What does Nehemiah himself confess in verse 10? What does he resolve shall be done? \_\_\_\_\_

6. What does Nehemiah tell the guilty people to do? (5:11-12) What do they say that they will do? What does Nehemiah make them do?

7. How does Nehemiah illustrate this resolution? (5:13) What did the people then do? What does this reveal about them? \_\_\_\_\_

8. For how long was Nehemiah the governor of Judah? (5:14) During that length of time, how did he conduct himself? \_\_\_\_\_

9. How did previous governors behave while in power? (5:15) How did Nehemiah behave, and what motivated him? \_\_\_\_\_

Near the end of his life, Lord Shaftesbury wrote: 'I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return.'

10. What other things does Nehemiah say about how he governed Judah? (5:16-18) What is the motivation that is mentioned here? \_\_\_\_\_

Notice that two things motivated Nehemiah - the fear of God (5:15) and compassion for the people (5:18).

11. What does Nehemiah pray for in verse 19? Is this the basis for his salvation or the expression of a good conscience? \_\_\_\_\_

**Battling on Against Opposition (Neh.6)**

1. At what stage is the rebuilding of the wall project by 6:1? Who was opposed to the project? What did they do? (6:1-2) \_\_\_\_\_

The evangelical student leader, Fred Crittendon, said 'O No' to the increasingly liberal Student Christian Movement leaders at Oxford in the 1920s.

2. What can we learn from Nehemiah's response in verse 3? When is it a waste of time to discuss or debate? \_\_\_\_\_

3. How did they respond, and how did Nehemiah respond? (6:4) \_\_\_\_\_

4. What happened on the fifth occasion? (6:5-7) What was the charge against Nehemiah and the Jews? What did Sanballat and the other conspirators suggest in verse 7? \_\_\_\_\_

The other king referred to in verse 7 is the Persian king.

5. What was Nehemiah's response in verse 8? What can we learn from this? \_\_\_\_\_

6. What was Sanballat and his fellow conspirators trying to do? (6:9) How did Nehemiah strengthen himself against them? \_\_\_\_\_

Charles Swindoll calls Nehemiah 'a leader from the knees up'.

7. What was the next plot against Nehemiah? (6:10-14) Who was involved in it? How did Nehemiah respond to it? What damage can be done by fear and a lack of discernment? How should faith take away fear and give us a greater measure of discernment? \_\_\_\_\_

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8. When is an imprecatory prayer as in verse 14 appropriate? \_\_\_\_\_

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9. When was the wall finally finished? (6:15) How long did the project take?

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10. How did Judah's enemies respond to this, and what did they realise? (6:16) When can such times come to the Church? \_\_\_\_\_

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11. Is all Israel truly Israel? What alliances are revealed in verses 17-19? (see too Neh.13:4, 28; also Ezra 10:15 for opposition to the covenant renewal in Ezra's day) What did this mean for Nehemiah? \_\_\_\_\_

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12. Summarise the opposition and difficulties that Nehemiah faced in chapters 4-6, and how he dealt with it all. \_\_\_\_\_

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**The Captives who Returned (Neh.7)**

1. What was done before the whole project could be viewed as finished? (7:1)

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2. What did Nehemiah do then? (7:2) Why? What can we learn from this? (2 Tim.2:2) \_\_\_\_\_

Hanani is the brother mentioned in Nehemiah 1, while Hananiah may be the wall builder of 3:30.

3. What precautions did Nehemiah continue to make? (7:3) What does this tell us about the situation? \_\_\_\_\_

This may just be referring to the midday siesta but it seems to be saying that the gates should not be open for longer than is necessary.

4. How is Jerusalem described in 445-444 B.C.? (7:4) Why is it like this? \_\_\_\_

5. What did Nehemiah do next, and why? (7:5) \_\_\_\_\_

6. Who had come back from captivity in Babylon? (7:6-72; see Ezra 2:1-70) Why is this genealogy so important in verses 64-65? What are verses 70-73 teaching us?

### **Renewal Through the Word (Neh.8)**

The section Nehemiah 8-10 concerns spiritual renewal - there is the teaching of the law of God (Neh.8), a prayer of confession (Neh.9), and a renewal of the covenant (Neh.10). Nehemiah was a governor, not a priest or a scribe. Hence he takes a back seat in this section and does not figure prominently.

1. Where did the people gather? (8:1) For what purpose? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Who gathered together? (8:2) When? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What did Ezra do? (8:3) How did the people respond? For how long did this go on? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Where was Ezra standing? (8:4) Who was with him? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What did Ezra and the other thirteen men do? (8:5-7) Do you think 8:8 gives a good definition of preaching? Is that what is commonly found in Western churches today? (note Hos.4:6) \_\_\_\_\_

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Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones contended that 'the most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching.'

6. In what two ways did the people respond? (8:9-12) Why would they respond like this? How is this an evidence that God is at work? What gives strength to God's people? What did Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites say to the people?

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When revival hit the little town of Northampton in Massachusetts in 1735, Jonathan Edwards recorded what happened: 'This work soon made a glorious alteration in the town. So that in the Spring and Summer following it seemed, that is to say the town, seemed to be full of the presence of God. It never was so full of love nor so full of joy and yet so full of distress as it was then ... The assembly in general were from time to time in tears while the Word was preached. Some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbours.'

The Christian life is a mixture: mourning for sin, joy for salvation. Read the Psalms, it is all there - joy (Psalm 16:11; 21:1) and mourning Psalm 25:18; 51:12).

7. What did the heads of houses, priests and Levites find when they studied God's law? (8:13-15; cf. Deut.16:13-15) How did they respond to this? (8:16-17) For how long had this been neglected? In what spirit was the feast of booths celebrated?

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Verse 17 means not that the feast of booths had not been celebrated since Joshua's

day - about 1,000 years before this - but it had not been celebrated with such rejoicing.

The true church is 'always Reformed, always reforming'. It is always reforming itself according to the Word of God.

8. In summary, what took place? (8:18) Then what took place? \_\_\_\_\_

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**The People Confess their Sins (Neh.9)**

We begin with a history lesson!

1. In what condition did the people assemble? (9:1-2) What did they do? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What else did they do? (9:3) How was their day spent? \_\_\_\_\_

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This may mean they read for six hours and confessed for six hours, or, as Derek Kidner thinks, they read for three hours and confessed for three hours.

3. Who was on the Levites' platform, and what did they do? (9:4) \_\_\_\_\_

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4. How does this prayer begin? (9:5) How should we begin our prayers? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What is the first thing we need to know about God? (9:6) What implications does this have for the Christian life? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. What did the creator do with Abraham? (9:7-8) What does this demonstrate about God? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. What did God do in the days of Moses at the time of the Exodus? (9:9-12) Again, what does this reveal about God? \_\_\_\_\_

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8. What did God do after He led His people out of bondage in Egypt? (9:13-14) What is said about the laws of God? \_\_\_\_\_

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The Sabbath is singled out, presumably because of the sins of the people mentioned in chapters 10 and 13.

9. Besides the law, what else did God provide for His people in the desert? (9:15)

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10. How did Israel respond to all God's goodness? (9:16-17a) \_\_\_\_\_

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11. Yet how did God respond to Israel's unfaithfulness and forgetfulness? (9:17b)  
What episode does Nehemiah specifically refer to? (9:18) \_\_\_\_\_

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12. In what ways did God provide for His people?

9:19 \_\_\_\_\_

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9:20a \_\_\_\_\_

9:20b \_\_\_\_\_

9:20c \_\_\_\_\_

9:21 \_\_\_\_\_ 9:22

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9:23 \_\_\_\_\_

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9:25 \_\_\_\_\_

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13. But what did the Israelites do with God's law, and what did they do with God's prophets? (9:26) For what purpose? \_\_\_\_\_

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14. What pattern of history emerges, especially with the book of Judges? (9:27-29)  
Where was life to be found? But what was Israel's response to God's declaration of His will? \_\_\_\_\_

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15. What did God continue to do, and what did Israel continue to do? (9:30-31)

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16. Now Nehemiah comes to start his actual petition - after 27 verses! Yet how does he begin this petition? (9:32-35) What two things does he continue to emphasise?

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17. How does Nehemiah see Israel's present condition? (9:36-37) \_\_\_\_\_

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18. What is to be the result of this prayer of confession? (9:38) Who is to sign this covenant of renewal? What use are we to make of the fact that God is so longsuffering? (Rom.2:4) \_\_\_\_\_

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When the Emperor Sigismund fell sick, he professed repentance, and when he recovered he asked Theodoric, Archbishop of Cologne, how he might know whether his repentance was sincere. Theodoric replied: 'If you are as careful to perform in your health, as you are forward to promise in your sickness, you may safely draw that inference.'

**The Covenant Renewed (Neh.10)**

1. Who put their names to this document of covenant renewal? (i.e. who they are, not their specific names, except for Nehemiah)

10:1 \_\_\_\_\_

10:2-8 \_\_\_\_\_

10:9-13 \_\_\_\_\_

10:14-27 \_\_\_\_\_

2. What did the whole covenant community vow to do? (10:28-29) \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What four issues are dealt with in this covenant renewal? How might each one apply to us today?

10:30 (see Ex.34:12-16; 1 Cor.7:39; 2 Cor.6:14) \_\_\_\_\_

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10:31 (see too Ex.23:10-11) \_\_\_\_\_

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10:32-33 \_\_\_\_\_

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10:34-39 \_\_\_\_\_

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**Covering Every Area of Life (Neh.11-12)**

Terence in 2nd century B.C.: 'I am a human being, and I count nothing human as alien to me.' In these two chapters Nehemiah deals with the repopulation of Jerusalem, and joins in the celebrations for the dedication of the wall. So Nehemiah is involved in politics and religion!

1. What remedy was adopted to repopulate Jerusalem? (11:1-2; note 7:4) \_\_\_\_\_

Most of the West today is not reproducing itself. Populations are only rising in Europe and Australia because of immigration. Natural increase is not keeping up with deaths.

2. What resulted from the lots and the encouragement to populate Jerusalem? (11:3-36) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Who returned to Jerusalem back in the days of Zerubbabel and Joshua i.e. 538 B.C.? (12:1-26) \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is described next? (12:27-30; remember 6:15) In what spirit did the people come? What instruments were used? \_\_\_\_\_

5. How many choirs were there? (12:31) Who led one of them? (12:36) What did the choirs do? (12:38) Where was Nehemiah the governor in all this? (12:38, 40)

*It takes more grace than I can tell*

*To play the second fiddle well.*

Robert Murray M'Cheyne left his parish of Dundee for a time, and while he was away, a revival broke out under the preaching of W. C. Burns.

6. How did they sing? (12:42-43) What did they sing? \_\_\_\_\_

It all sounds like the words of the Free Kirk with a Pentecostal beat!

7. What else happened? (12:44-47) \_\_\_\_\_

### The Covenant Renewed Again (Neh.13)

Nehemiah has already told of how he (the governor) and the other leaders put their names to a document of covenant renewal. The covenant community would return to the Word of God (10:28-29). This renewal covered four specific areas:

- a. no mixed marriages (10:30).
- b. keeping the Sabbath (10:31).
- c. paying the temple tax (10:32-33).
- d. maintaining the temple (10:34-39).

These issues were dealt with in chapter 10 but they re-emerge in chapter 13. Because of Nehemiah 10, Nehemiah 13 seems to be something of an anti-climax. But it shows us the honesty of the Bible - there is no fairy tale ending to the book of Nehemiah - and how fragile and sinful is human nature, even of those within the covenant community.

1. What did the people find in the book of Moses? (13:1-3; Deut.23:3-6) What did they do as a result? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Who was Eliashib? (13:4-5) With whom was he associated? What had Eliashib done? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Where was Nehemiah at this time? (13:6-7a) What happened after this? \_\_\_\_\_

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Nehemiah's first stint as governor lasted for twelve years, from 445-433 B.C. Then he returned to Persia (13:6), but later - it seems to have been a few years - he returned for a second stint as governor.

4. What did Nehemiah find in his second stint as governor? (13:7-9) What did he do about it? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What else did he find, and what did he do about that? (13:10-13) \_\_\_\_\_

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6. What is Nehemiah's prayer in verse 14? How are we to interpret this? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. What else was happening? (13:15-16) How did Nehemiah respond to this? (13:17-

22a) Again, what is Nehemiah's prayer? (13:22b) \_\_\_\_\_

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8. In what other area were the Jews departing from God's Word? (13:23-24) \_\_

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9. How vigorously did Nehemiah respond to this? (13:25-27) What is Nehemiah's view of all this? To what bad example does he appeal? \_\_\_\_\_

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10. Who was compromised in this area of life? (13:28) \_\_\_\_\_

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Derek Kidner: 'A single generation's compromise could undo the work of centuries'. Note Judges 2:7-10. Think of North Africa after Augustine's death, Geneva after Calvin's death, the Metropolitan Tabernacle after Spurgeon was gone, and Westminster Chapel after Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones was gone. The church can quickly go off track (Gal.1:6-7). Jonathan Edwards saw revival in Northampton in 1734-5 and 1740-1 but was dismissed as pastor in 1750.

11. What do you note about Nehemiah's prayers in 13:29-31? \_\_\_\_\_

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12. How difficult is it to pick yourself up, and press on in the work of God when you have experienced great disappointment? \_\_\_\_\_

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Rudyard Kipling referred to Triumph and Disaster as 'those two impostors'.

13. Did Nehemiah 'retire' while still in office, and wait for his pension? (13:8-9, 11, 13, 15b, 22, 25) How can we maintain our spiritual vigour? (2 Cor. 4:7-18)

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The period 1848-59 on Aneityum, in the south of the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), saw many conversions under the faithful work of John Geddie, John Inglis, and Polynesian and Melanesian teachers. Then came the terrible events of 1859-62. About one-third of the population perished through a measles epidemic, disputes broke out, there were murders and loss of missionary life on other islands. So the period 1863-72 was one of rebuilding, which must have been more difficult than the original work of evangelism.

William Wilberforce was elected into parliament in 1780. He began to seek the



abolition of the slave trade in 1788. He failed year after year until 1807 i.e. nineteen years later.

William Carey, the great Baptist missionary and linguist, arrived in India in 1793. The first convert came after seven and a half years. Then the work seemed to accelerate, but in 1812 a fire broke out which destroyed the printing house, with presses, paper, books, and manuscripts. It seems to have been an accident and not a case of arson. This is Carey's response: 'The Lord has laid me low, that I might look more simply to him.' He pressed on, being helped by sympathy in Calcutta and gifts from England. As his sister commented: 'Whatever he began he finished: difficulties never seemed to discourage his mind'.

God is the one who lifts up the downcast, and renews His people.