

A Patristic Commentary



THE BOOK OF NEHEMIA

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A COMMENTARY ON

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

BY

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GOD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Nehemiah was the leader of the third and last patch of the Jewish captives who returned to Jerusalem (About the year 445 or 444 BC – after about a century from the return of the first batch). Caring to rebuild the destroyed wall of the city, and its gates burnt by fire, he calls us to an important fact that touches the life of every believer. Nehemiah perceived that his true mission in life was greater than being the ‘cup-bearer’ of the greatest king at that time, and his personal counselor with great daring with him. Through his fiery heart, he perceived that he had a greater mission by God; namely to consummate a certain job, beyond all his capabilities, talents, and possibilities. . He was called to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and to rebuild the society itself; he was called to fulfill things that may seem utterly impossible.

The book of Nehemiah presents to us the truth of “**God of the impossible**”; who works in all eras, (in the last watch of the night); when all human arms are completely helpless.

Everyone of us is attacked every now and then by some kind of depression. But Nehemiah reveals to us that our God is the Hope for whoever loses hope; who replaces despair with the spirit of hope, joy, and conquest..... Whenever we enter into the whirlpool of feeling complete helplessness, and count the circumstances surrounding us as utterly impossible, God presents to us the message saying: *“With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God everything is possible”* (Mark 10: 27). He works for the sake of all mankind, particularly for the sake of His church; and He cares for everyone, as though there is no one else in the world but him.

GOD OF EVERY COMFORT:

The name ‘Nehemiah’ reveals the essence of the whole book. For the word ‘Nehemiah’ means (Jehoah is comfort). The whole book goes around the role of God in the life of the church, as well as in that of the believer. Whoever wishes to have true comfort, resorts to God, the Grantor of comfort, and trusts in His promises; for then, the divine comforts will fill him, and will even cover everyone around him; according to the words of the apostle Paul: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God”* (2 Corinthians 1: 3-5).

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

“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” (13: 14)

A historical background:

After the death of king Solomon the kingdom of Israel was divided into:

1- The Northern Kingdom (Israel): Ten tribes, who were captivated by the Assyrians in the year 722 BC. King Shalmaneser the fifth, put king Hoshea under arrest, carried Israel away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah,

Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes (2 kings 17: 6). And king Sargon the second boasted in that he led 27290 Israelites into captivity; and replaced them by other people from the region of Mesopotamia (Messisa) and Syria.

2- The Southern Kingdom (Judah): Two tribes: Judah and Benjamin; who were captivated by the Babylonians in the year 586 BC. It was said about Nebuchadnezzar, that: *"He carried into captivity all Jerusalem; all th*

captains, and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land" (2 kings 24: 14); he carried them all to Babylon (2 kings 24: 15).

In the year 539 BC, the Persians defeated Babylon; and the king of Persia encouraged the Jews to return to their homeland. 50,000 returned to start rebuilding the temple. Yet, they laid the foundation, but they did not consummate the work. After 16 years, God sent two prophets: Haggai and Zechariah, to exhort the people to resume work, and to rebuke those who got preoccupied with building palaces and houses for themselves, and forgot all about the house of the Lord.

In the year 458 BC another batch of the Jews returned to Jerusalem, under the leadership of 'Ezra', who did his best to reform the people spiritually; against strong opposition.

And about the year 445 BC, God sent 'Nehemiah', and called him to rebuild the broken-down wall of Jerusalem; for, without a wall, Jerusalem would not be

counted as a city. Some put Ezzra after Nehemiah; which is obviously wrong. Nehemiah completed the building of the wall in 52 days, and rebuilt the temple in spite of the opposition of the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Assyrians, and the Arabs; who later on had help from the Samaritans. He confronted all those opponents by having faith in God; and Jerusalem was fortified, 142 years after its desolation in the year 586 BC.

The author of the book:

According to the Jewish tradition, the four books: The first and the second books of the chronicles; the book of Ezra, and the book of Nehemiah, in the Hebrew text, were one book, written by Ezra the scribe.

The two last books, having a mutual nature and perception, many scholars believe that they were authored by Ezra, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; depending upon documents, chronicles of the contemporary kings and kingdoms, beside quoting from the personal diaries of Nehemiah.... Because a great part of the book was written in the singular tense, some believe that it is written by Nehemiah himself; but, most probably, Nehemiah wrote the book by help from Ezra.

Who is Nehemiah?

Nehemiah was a laic, and not a priest or scribe like Ezra; although his role was not less important than that of Ezra. He was born in captivity; and became a 'cup-bearer – Trachta' of king 'Artaxerxes'; a prominent position, probably through the influence of queen Esther, who was still alive – the step-mother of the king,. The job of the cup-bearer was to taste the wine before the king does, to make sure that it is not poisoned. In the Persian era, it was a prominent position, on account of that the king entrusts him with his life. Because the cup-bearer was most probably an eunuch, there was no reference to Nehemiah's family.

Despite his prominent position, Nehemiah's heart was not haughty; he was a man of prayer, who felt the divine call to serve his spiritually deteriorated people. He was ready to forsake the luxury of the palace to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem; and to reform the people themselves.

Having heard about the condition of Jerusalem, he sat with himself, wailed, fasted, and prayed to God..... God gave him favor in the sight of the king, who sent him forth to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, provided with letters of recommendation. He went with the capacity of a royal governor, appointed by the emperor of Persia.

While Ezra cared for the religious reform of the people; Nehemiah, on the other hand, cared for the political, and the geographical reform; yet without disregarding the spiritual and ethical aspects of reform.

Nehemiah departed from Persia in the twentieth year of king Artaxerxes (2: 1); returned to it in the twenty-third year of his reign (13: 6); then left after few days, to go again to Jerusalem (13: 6).

He built the wall despite the opposition of the enemies. Like Ezra who went to Jerusalem about 13 years before him. Nehemiah also cared for the inner building of the people; then returned to Shushan the capital for a little while. On returning to Jerusalem for the second time, he found out that serious offenses have taken place during his absence. He indeed managed to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem during his previous stay in 52 days; then spent several years to do spiritual and social reform (5: 14); yet, once he left them, the spiritual measures were shaken. Rebuilding the wall needed only 52 days; whereas rebuilding the human soul would need several years.

Nehemiah remained at least 12 years as the governor of Judah (5: 14);..... even though, according to the Historian Josephus, he stayed a governor on Judah until his old age.

Nehemiah, the leader:

Although Nehemiah was sent by the Persian king as a civil leader; yet he represented the true spiritual leadership:

- He was not preoccupied with his official position, as much as with the sufferings of his brethren. He had forsaken the easy, and secure life of luxury, in the royal palace in Persia, to partake of the life of labor and suffering of his people; to come to be a true reformer.
- Nehemiah presents to us a living portrait of a man who mixes his practical with his spiritual life; to appear as a man of prayer; who trusts in God who grants success, yet not in smoothness. Believing in prayer, he had a strong personality, and was courageous in the Lord. He presents to us a living concept of the dedication of the heart and of the hands. The living leader is a man of both prayer and work; who leads those around him to bear the same spirit. ... Even though Nehemiah was not born a leader; was not of royal descent like Zerubbabel, nor a priest like Ezra; nor an administrator like Daniel (the prime minister); yet his great love for his people, and his zeal on the sanctities, made a leader out of him. He learned how to be a leader through the bowed-down knees, the silence, the tears, and crying out to God, and not to men. He practiced prayer under all circumstances (See Philippians 4: 6):.

When he heard the bad news about the condition of Jerusalem, he resorted to prayer to seek God's counsel.

When he stood before king Artaxerxes (2: 4), he believed that prayer will open the way before him.

When he confronted opposition (4: 4, 9), he was sure that prayer will grant him wisdom and conquest.

When he was confronted by false accusations (6: 8, 9), he knew for sure that prayer will lift him up above the events.

When he consummated his mission (13: 14), he perceived that prayer grants understanding.

- Being a man of action, he secretly moved forth to the place of work (2: 11-15), saying: *"Come, and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach"* (17); organized all the energies for work, and assigned to everyone his role (3: 1-32). Perceiving the greatness of the work, being the work of the Lord (4: 14), he challenged the opposition (6: 3), by doing the work under armed guards (4: 16).
- He believed in the outer work (building the wall), together with the inner work, (building the souls)..
- With God, he strived by true worship; With the king, by faithfulness in work, together with courage and humility; With the people, by providing them with the spirit of hope; And with the enemies, by not being confused in vain debates with them. The outer and inner opposition, did not discourage him, but, on the contrary, motivated him to work with greater power, believing that he works to the account of the Lord and not of men.
- As a living leader, he stirred up the spirit of leadership in the life of all the people; believing that every man has his own cherished role and work.

Nehemiah's features:

Som may consider the book of Nehemiah as a book of construction; when it is actually the book of prayer and of leadership. It demonstrates the secret of Nehemiah's success, as being the man of prayer; not only for knowing what he is praying for, but for knowing how to have personal care. He was granted by the Lord, the grace to bear, by love, the burden of the people in his heart, to cast them at the feet of the Lord.

Nehemiah's heart was more preoccupied, not with building the wall, setting the gates and boulders, but with building the people of God, and with reviving them from the state of death that has utterly destroyed them. That made him a mature leader in the Lord, and a man of prayer, to enter by his prayer into the divine throne, and to take by faith for himself, exalted possibilities. Nehemiah knew how to talk to God more than to men.

A historical parade of events:

586 BC	The captivation of the Jewish people to Babylon; and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.
537 BC	In the time of king Cyrus, the return of the first batch from captivity, under the leadership of Zerubbabel; together with some effort to build the temple.
530 – 522 BC	Cambiz reigns over Persia.
522 – 486 BC	Darius the first (Hestapis) reigns over Persia.
520 – 516 BC	Rebuilding the temple in the reign of Darius the first.
468 – 465 BC	Ahasuerus the first reigns over Persia
465 – 424 BC	Artaxerxes the first (Longmanus) reigns over Persia
458 BC	The return to Jerusalem of the second batch from captivity under the leadership of Ezra.
445 or 444 BC	The return to Jerusalem of the third and last batch from captivity under the leadership of Nehemiah; and building the wall.
433 BC	The return of Nehemiah for a little while to Babylon

432 BC	The return of Nehemiah to Jerusalem
430 BC	The beginning of the ministry of the prophet Malachi

THE PERSONALITY OF NEHEMIAH

Probably more than any other book of the Old Testament, the book of Nehemiah shows the personality of its author, full of life, on many aspects, among which are:

1- The oneness of life:

Nehemiah believed in the oneness of life; that there is no separation between the work and the spiritual or the social life. The believer has one life of many aspects, that react together to make out of him a successful man in everything. A life of harmony, together with the necessity of specialization; as every man has his active role, according to his possibilities and talents, without disregarding or despising the roles of others. All work together by one spirit, toward one goal (5: 10-11).

Concerning Nehemiah, although building the wall of Jerusalem, is considered the climax of his ministry; yet his dedication was not a show off of heroic works; as much as it was a seal of God's work in his life, and that of the people, that touch their whole being; for what they did was the work of the Lord, as testified, even by the enemies (6: 16)..

Being preoccupied with the building of the wall of Jerusalem, Nehemiah called his friend and co-worker 'Ezra', to take on the leadership of the spiritual rites of dedication (12: 27-47) -- A living portrait of mutual work, and giving honor to the others.

The book binds between rebuilding the walls of the city, and rebuilding the temple; care for worship, particularly for reading the law of God, enjoying the feasts, the spiritual and the civil life of the people. For there would be no benefit of building the wall, unless the city become holy; And there would be no value of the city and its wall, without a holy people of the Lord. Such sanctification would be only realized by the true repentance, by the spirit of hope (Nehemiah 1: 4-11; 9: 5-37); and by care for keeping the law, as a foundation of life.

2- His faithfulness:

Together with the multitude of responsibilities, and the urgency of work, not being preoccupied with foolish debates with the opponents; Yet the obvious feature in the life of Nehemiah was the faithfulness in his life on all aspects, and wherever he might be (12: 8; 6: 2). This particular feature reflected upon many of those working under him in all fields.

He was faithful in his relationship with God; perpetually feeling the divine presence, while talking to the pagan king, while working in Jerusalem, and while being opposed by the enemies. The eyes of his heart saw God by faith, and have never gone astray.

He was so faithful to draw the heart of the pagan king, to be entrusted with the king's life, and with being sent by him to work in Jerusalem

He was faithful in his relationship with all the categories of his people; whether on the level of the leaders, the priests, the rich, and the poor.

He was faithful concerning his patriotism; working to the account of his own country, Israel, without any treason or betrayal to the kingdom of Persia.

3- A man of action:

Having heard the miserable condition of Jerusalem and its people, Nehemiah did not preoccupy himself with analyzing the problems, and discussing them with many; but he put them before God, and moved forth to deal with the situation. We do not deny the importance of debate, which would become fruitless without leaning upon the chest of God, and the practical and serious going forth to deal with the situation.. Nehemiah wept out of grief; yet he was not swallowed up by the spirit of despair; but went forth to work, supported by the strong hand of God, according to the talent given to him; and provoked many to work; everyone according to his own talents, possibilities, and talent ; through the feeling of collective responsibility.

4- He challenged the devil, and was not confused by his opposition:

The perpetual opposition and tricks of the devil against the believers, did not change since the beginning; he kept on stirring up his followers, by every means, to stop or to delay the divine work (2: 17-20). Even though the king of Persia issued his commands to help Nehemiah, yet the opponents did contrary to those commands.

- By scoffing and despising the workers (2: 19); in an attempt to lead Nehemiah and his collaborators to belittle themselves, and to fall into despair (4: 1-6).
- By counting the good work as something against them personally (2: 10).
- By vain accusations against the person of Nehemiah (2: 19)
- By being greatly offended against those who work to the account of the kingdom of God (4: 1)
- By plotting in secret to war against the workers, and to harm them (4: 8)
- By seeking to enter into debate with Nehemiah, in an attempt to delay the work; but to no avail (6: 2-3)

- The enemy resorted to bring fear and terror to break up the psyche of the workers (6: 19).

5- He believed in the collective work

Nehemiah cared to let the whole people participate in the task of rebuilding the wall (2: 17-18); *“for all are God’s fellow workers; God’s field; and God’s building; With one foundation”* (1 Corinthians 3: 9, 11)

6- He was a man of decency and order:

Motivating the whole people to partake of the work, refers to his commitment to *“let all things be done decently and in order”* in the spiritual building (1 Corinthians 14: 40; Ephesians 2: 21).

7- Nehemiah’s features as a living leader:

- He bore the burdens of the people; and not the other way round (See Romans 10: 11).
- As a man of prayer, godliness, and work, he trusted in, and depended on God’s promises, to realize the impossible.
- He was featured with the clarity of goal, and non-perversion from it; and with being ready to work, whatever the cost may be.
- He was persistent, ready to challenge any opposition inside and outside, with tranquility and peace.
- A leader who planned ahead, and exhorted those who work under him to do everything decently and with order.
- He perceived the danger of retreat and making truce with the enemies..
- He was patriotic, *“rendered to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s”* (Matthew 22: 21).
- As a leader, he had compassion on the poor and the miserable.

- Appreciating the value of time, he consummated rebuilding the wall in 52 days.
- He was firm against evil.

8- NEHEMIAH AS A SYMBOL OF THE LORD CHRIST – THE DIVINE MINISTER:

The book portrays to us the person of Nehemiah, as a minister who works to the account of his people; in which he bears a symbol of the person of the Lord Christ, the Minister; as portrayed by Mark the apostle in his gospel:

- Both prayed and fasted (1: 4; Mark 1: 35)
- Both called others to the divine work (6: 15; Mark 3: 13-19)
- Both confronted opposition (5: 4; Mark 1: 12; !2: 3)
- Both were role models of service (14: 5; 5: 9; Mark 9: 7)
- Both were servants to the people (5: 19; Mark 10: 45)
- Both taught the Word of God (8: 1-3; Matthew 5: 17-45)
- Both purified the temple (13: 7-9; Mark 11: 15-17)
- Both rebuked the hypocrites (13: 15-22; Matthew 23: 13-36).

THE DIVISIONS OF THE BOOK:

(1) Building the wall: (1 to 7)

A- Preparations for the building: (1 -2)

- a- Nehemiah before God (1)
- b- Nehemiah before the king (2: 1-8)
- c- Nehemiah visits Jerusalem (2: 9-18)
- d- Nehemiah confronts the scoffers (2: 19-20)

B- Building the wall: (3-7)

Building the wall presents to us a living portrait of the sound spiritual building

a- All partook of the work (3), from the High priest to the priests, to give an example of the collective work.

b- Stirred up against him, the enemy resorted to psychological war (4). For, every living edifying work stirs the devil up, to use psychological and physical weapons; we should say: "God fights for us" (4: 20).

c- The inner building: (5). The outer wall would not be built without the inner building; hence, Nehemiah cared for the poor; and sought from the rich to restore what they have charged the poor.

d- The wall was built despite of the opposition (6)

e- Guarding the work with wisdom (7)

(2) Building the people(8-13)

A- Reading the law:

Ezra the priest stood on a wooden podium, and publicly read and explained the law; 100 years after the return of the Jews under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

B- Renewal of the covenant (9-10)

a- By reading the Word of God, the spiritual building was consummated through the collective repentance (9).

b- Pledging offerings to the Lord (10)

C- The people settle down (11)

D- Dedication of the wall with Joy: (12)

E- Reforms after the second return: (13)

Nehemiah went forth to Babylon for a while, then returned to Jerusalem to find many transgressions have taken place, which he corrected by a heart wide with hope:

- a- Separation of the strangers (1-3)
- b- Restoration of the offerings to the Lord (4-14)
- c- Keeping the Sabbath (15-22)
- d- Of the blessings of the Lord on them, the Jews, by the captivity, did not practice the pagan worship; yet, those who have fallen into marrying pagan wives, in particular the priests and the Levites, Nehemiah chastised (23-31). That is why, the apostle Paul warns us saying: *“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers”* (2 Corinthians 6: 14).

“Remember me, O my God, for good” (13: 31)

LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH:

- The greatest works to the account of the kingdom of God, starts by one faithful person (1: 2-4)
- The living leader refers the sins and weaknesses of the people to himself (1: 3, 4; Hebrews 11: 24-27).
- Prayer is our refuge at the start of the way, in its middle, and even up to its end
- Confessing sins is the sure way to enjoy the mercies of God (1: 6-11)
- The best way to reach the hearts of men is God (1: 11)
- Once you minister to God, the devil will fight against you (2: 19, 20; 4: 1-9).

FEATURES OF NEHEMIAH’S PRAYER:

- a- Full of zeal, together with tranquility of the soul, tears, and fasting; and extends day and night (1-4).
- b- Full of hope, anticipating the mercies of God (1: 5, 6)
- c- It bears humility, together with the confession of sins (1: 6-8)
- d- Accompanied with faith in the fulfillment of God's promises to the repentant who obey His commands (1: 9)
- e- Practical without selfishness (1, 10: 10)
- f- Active, accompanied with work (5, 2: 4)
- g- To the account of the glory of God (2: 8).

A BOOK OF REMINISCENCE:

In his prayers, Nehemiah reminded God of His promises to His children. In that he was like a little child on his father's chest, seeking from him to fulfill what he promised him; which brings joy to his heavenly Father. In his first prayer he says: *"Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying"* (1: 8)

PROSPERITY IS A DIVINE GIFT:

Believing that success is a divine gift; Nehemiah cries out to the Lord his God, saying: *"Let Your servant prosper this day"* (1: 11)

THE TWO JOURNEYS TO FREEDOM:

	1- THE EXODUS FROM EGYPT	2- THE RETURN FROM CAPTIVITY
The patches	One patch	Three patches
The leaders	Moses and Aaron, then Joshua	1- Zerubbabel 537 B.C. 2- Ezra 458 B.C. 3- Nehemiah 445 B.C.

Where?	In Egypt, after 430 years	In Babylon after 70 years
Duration	About 40 years	About a century
Number of people	About one million	About 60,000
The goal	The enjoyment of the promised land Persistent complaint and rebellion	Rebuilding the temple, the city, and the wall
The obstacles	The Red Sea; the wilderness; the enemies; and the River Jordan	The desolation, weak possibilities, enemies all around; inner fears
The offenses	The rebellion	Fear; despair; slothfulness; social oppression; spiritual collapse
The lessons learned	God is the true Leader The church (the tabernacle) – the icon of heaven Need for priesthood, and sacrifices (Christ is both the Priest and the Sacrifice)	God is the Leader Everyone has his role and work The spiritual and the physical building No salvation without repentance.

The prayers of Nehemiah:

THE REFERENCE	WHEN	ABOUT THE PRAYER
1: 4- 11	After hearing about the miserable condition of his people	Repentance as a way for God's work in us
2: 4	During his talk with the king	Feeling the divine presence wherever we are

4: 4 - 5	After the enemies scoffed him	The opposition of the enemies is directed toward God
4: 9	The enemy threatened him	God is the Keeper of those who work to His account; in whom He works
6: 9	Responding to the threats	He seeks from God to strengthen his will
13: 9 (5: 9)		He hides behind God who scatters the counsels of the enemies
5: 19; 13: 14, 22, 31		He seeks from God to remember him

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

CARRY ME, O LORD, TO THE LOCATION OF MINISTRY

- + Carry me on the eternal arms;
For You are our Heavenly Father;
Bring me into Your vineyard;
The little thing becomes extremely great;
When I consummate Your great task, O my Heavenly Father.
- + For the sake of Your great name;
Grant me to work with You, O amazing in His love;
Carry me, so that, in my turn I carry my brethren;
So that we all work with Your fiery Spirit;
So that we work by the spirit of love and unity;

So that the word 'impossible' would disappear from our life.

- + I wish to serve You, O Holy One;
I wish to work by, and with You;
I wish to exhort everyone to work in Your vineyard;
The enemy stands against me to break down every divine work;
For he sees in every good work I do, a challenge against him;
He sometimes threatens to frighten me;
And other times flirts with me to corrupt my time with vain and foolish debates;
He sometimes pretends to show gentleness, and other times shows anger and ferocity;
He sometimes shows his weapon to me;
And other times he plots to deceive and destroy in secret;
He sometimes scoffs my work to make me despair;
And other times, accuses me profusely.
- + I truly perceived that I am not a party in this battle;
For the enemy means to oppose You personally;
I shall hide in You to enjoy Your conquest;
My soul will exult and unceasingly praise You;
The battle will turn into a heavenly procession with nothing but joy and exultation.
- + Now, I come out of the battle, perceiving an amazing secret;
That You work by, in, and with us;
Let me then begin my work with a prayer;
And, while working, I shall keep lifting my heart to You;
My soul will keep praying even after I end my work;
For You are the beginning and the end.

- + Nehemiah finally rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem;
And by Your command, he rebuilt the people of Jerusalem;
Dedicating the wall, he turned the life of the people to a joyful feast;
My inner Jerusalem is without a wall;
Who will build its wall?
Who will set its glory?
You promised me: *".....I shall be a wall of fire all around her;
And I will be the glory in her midst"* (Zechariah 2: 5)

WHAT WAS SAID ABOUT THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM IN THE HOLY BOOK?

While studying the book of Nehemiah, we come in touch with the care of God Himself to rebuild the broken-down wall of Jerusalem. And we notice the repetition of the words of the great leader Nehemiah: *"Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people"* (Nehemiah 5: 19); and we also hear his words: *"Come, and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we no longer be a reproach"* (2: 17).. What does 'the wall of Jerusalem' mean, as far as we are concerned? And what did the fathers of the church say about the wall?

JERUSALEM, THE BELOVED BRIDE (Isaiah 62: 5-6)

Speaking about Jerusalem, the Lord says: *"As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem. They shall never hold their peace day or night"* (Isaiah 62: 5-6).

The talk here concerns the new Jerusalem, namely the church, the bride of Christ. The watchmen set on her walls by the heavenly Bridegroom, according to Josabius of Caesaria, are the angels and the holy heavenly hosts. While, according to St. John Chrysostom, they are the leaders or priests of the church; and according to St. Cyril the Great, they, are the teachers of the divine secrets (mystaggués) who unceasingly work for the glory of the Lord, and His exalted wonders.

“THE SONS OF FOREIGNERS SHALL BUILD UP YOUR WALLS” (Isaiah 60: 10)

If Jerusalem refers to the church of God in the new covenant; Who are *“the sons of the foreigners”* who shall build its walls?” ... The Lord Christ came to the Jews, His own, who did not receive Him, Whereas the foreign Gentiles became witnesses and preachers of the evangelic truth. According to the apostle Paul: *“You are no longer strangers, and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God”* (Ephesians 2: 19)

According to Josabius, bishop of Caesaria, who wrote about the great emperor Constantin, commending him on his great services to the church: [The foreigners here are the Roman emperors, princes, and leaders, who contributed to building the walls of the church].

And according to St. Cyril the Great: [The walls of the church are the sound faith. The apostles, who built the walls by their preaching that faith, were not referred to the Jewish race, but became foreigners from them].

And according to Theodoret: [The foreigners here are the teachers who came from nations foreign to Israel, and became watchmen over the walls of the church by their prayers and teachings].

“ I HAVE INSCRIBED YOUR WALLS ON THE PALMS OF MY HAND; YOU ARE CONTINUALLY BEFORE ME” (Isaiah 49: 16 LXX – the Septuagint version)

According to St. Cyril the Great, the walls inscribed on the palms of the hands of God, are the saintly apostles and evangelists.

Whereas according to Theodoret, who adopts the historical interpretation, the prophet here talks about the desolation of the walls of Zion on the hands of the Babylonians. While commanding them to rebuild them, He is so preoccupied with it, to seem as though He is the Architect responsible for the whole project.

According to Josabius of Caesaria, the issue concerns the building of the true Jerusalem in the human souls, and the edification of the church.

- + Let us flee from evil, and raise our souls up to the image and likeness of God. Fleeing from evil is to imitate God; and the image of God is acquired by virtues. Like an artist who inscribed us by the colors of virtues; saying: *“I have inscribed your walls, O Jerusalem, on the palms of My hands”* (Isaiah 49: 16 LXX); I wish we do not wipe them out through negligence.....By these walls, the city, namely the soul, is watched and protected..... The walls is truly a wall extending all around the camp; hence the bride, in Solomon’s song, says: *“I am a wall, and my breasts like towers”* (Songs 8: 10). The wall, portrayed by the Good Lord, saying: *“I have inscribed your walls on the palms of My hands, You are continually before Me”* (Isaiah 49: 16 LXX).
- + *“I am a wall, and my breasts like towers”* (Songs 8: 10). The wall is the church, and the towers are her priests, who have the perfect power of providing the natural and ethical teachings.

(St. Ambrose)

“EVEN TO THEM I WILL GIVE IN MY HOUSE, AND WITHIN MY WALLS A PLACE AND A NAME” (Isaiah 56: 5)

“I will give them in my house, and within My walls a place and a name, better than that of sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 56: 5).

According to St. Augustine, this everlasting name given by God (to the sons of the foreigners), in His house and within His walls, is to bring them forth out of the shadows of the old time to the eternal lights.

CHRIST IS THE WALL OF OUR JERUSALEM:

According to ‘Venecundus’: [If we turn our face toward the wall when we are struck by the fear of death; namely when we direct the insight of our hearts toward the Savior – portrayed here by a Wall – we become saved; for He

saves the believers who live in Him against many attacks. According to Isaiah:

“We have a strong city; God will appoint salvation for walls and bulwarks” (Isaiah 26: 1). See how God is likened to a Wall}.

Such an interpretation conforms to the saying of the Lord: *“I shall be a wall of fire all around her; and I will be the glory in her midst”* (Zechariah 2: 5).

THE WATERS TURN INTO A WALL:

It is written: *“So the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground, and the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left”* (Exodus 14: 22, 29). That work proclaims the love of God for man, and His salvation work. According to the scholar Origen: [The waters turned into mountains!... The retreating waters turned into walls The bottom of the sea was exposed, and proved to be only sands I wish you

perceive the extent of God’s love; for, once you obey His will, and keep His law, He will force the things to act against their nature for the sake of your service].

The scholar Origen was often preoccupied with the scene of the exodus of the children of Israel under the leadership of the prophet Moses, and their crossing over the Red Sea. For once Moses struck the sea with his staff, it was divided before the people, as though to welcome them to cross over through it.

It is a magnificent portrait of the church of the new covenant, following her Christ, and even attaching herself to Him, being the body, attached to the Head; And by His (staff), namely His cross, the world, disturbed by the violent waves of temptations, will turn into an enjoyable way to cross over to eternity.

The destructive waters will turn into a wall on the right and on the left; to let the believer walk along the straightforward way, with no perversion to the right or to the left; to walk in the refuge of his Christ, who turns everything to the edification of his soul..

+ God commanded the prophet Moses to strike the sea with his staff to divide and to retreat, to let the people of God enter into its midst (Exodus 14: 21-22, 26); and to force the natural elements to serve man. And once the waters which they feared became for them a wall on the right and the

- left (Exodus 14: 29), it was no more destructive but protective;..... Notice the goodness of God, if you obey His will, and keep His law; He will commit the elements themselves to serve you, contrary to their nature.
- + What a horrible experience to cross over in the midst of the sea! ... to see the mighty waves with their high sound, and their stirred-up whirlpools! ... If you follow Moses, namely the law of God, waters will be for you walls on the right and on the left; you will walk on dry land in the midst of the sea. So it will happen in the heavenly journey; for great are the waves there !
 - + He, who is an Egyptian, and a follower of Pharaoh, will drown in the great flood of iniquities. Whereas he, who follows Christ, and walk as He did, waters will be for him a wall on the right and on the left. Until he crosses over to liberty, and there, he will sing the song of conquest to the Lord, saying: *"I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously"* (Exodus 15: 1).

(The scholar Origen)

"I HAVE MADE YOU BRONZE WALLS AGAINST THE WHOLE LAND"

If the enemy became like an army to oppose me; You are my strength, You will be for me a wall of fire to protect me; and a shield to confront the arrows of the enemy;You will strengthen my legs to become like a deer;You will lift me up as though on high mountains, away from harm;You will strengthen my hands to fight against the devil;You will widen my steps to chase the enemy and destroy him by the cross. *"For by You I can run against a troop; By my God I can leap over a wall"* (2 Samuel 22: 30; Psalm 18: 19). The

Lord confirms: *"For behold, I have made you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole landthey will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you; for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you"* (Jeremiah 1: 18, 19).

THE WALL OF DISCERNMENT:

- + 'The discernment', which is not only called "the light of the body", and "the sun"; for according to the apostle, *"Do not let the sun go down on your wrath"* (Ephesians 4: 26); but is also called "a ruler"; as the Holy Book does not allow us to do anything without Him: *"Whoever has no rule over his own spirit, is like a city broken down without walls"* (Proverbs 25: 28).

(Father Moses)

THE WALL OF THE COMMANDMENTS:

- + Our paradise is surrounded on all sides by the wall of the commandments, lest a thief or a wild beast would crawl into it.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

THE WALL OF THE HIGHER JERUSALEM:

St. John the beloved says: *"And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gate, and its walls.....Then he measured its wall, 144 cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of an angel"* (Revelation 21: 15, 17).

The children of the kingdom are well known, measured by God, and kept safe with Him. The unit of measurement is a reed of gold, namely, heavenly; for the spiritual and the heavenly things are only measured by what is spiritual and heavenly. The figure 144, refers to the (catholic) church (the church of the old covenant 12 X the church of the new covenant 12); which is surrounded by one Wall, to enjoy one God.The one who did the measurement is an angel and not an earthly man; lest you may imagine that in heaven there are any thing material or earthly.It is walled by God Himself, its Keeper; and it is made of pure gold crystal-like, namely heavenly.

THE WALLS OF THE ENEMY:

About those walls it is written: *"By faith, the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days"* (Hebrews 11: 30). *"And they shall destroy the walls of Tyre, and break down her towers. I will also scrape her dust from her, and make her like the top of a rock"* (Ezekiel 26: 4). *"Set up the standard on the walls of Babylon; Make the guard strong; Set up the watchmen; Prepare the ambushes, For the Lord has both devised and done what He spoke against the inhabitants of Babylon"* (Jeremiah 51: 12).

- + It is written: *"By my God I can leap over a wall"* (Psalm 18: 29 LXX) – the wall of evil that separates the brethren, stirs up dissensions between them; and let them go astray from the truth,
- + The Psalmist knew that the strength of the believers lies in giving thanks to God; for in their joy they leap over the walls of the enemies; the way the saints say: *"By my God I can leap over a wall"*.

(Pope Athanasius the apostolic)

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THE FIRST SECTION

BUILDING THE WALL

CHAPTER 1

NEHEMIAH'S CARE FOR JERUSALEM

Nebuchadnezzar broke down the wall of Jerusalem; and despite some attempts to rebuild it, it remained ruins for about a century and a half; which made the city open before many enemies, and there was need for a living leader like Jeremiah to rebuild it. In the year 458 B.C. the second batch of the captives returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra. Yet, being a scribe and a man of the law, Ezra cared only for collecting the Holy Books. Beside the man of the law, who cared for the Word of God, there was need in that critical period, for a man of action; And God prepared Nehemiah for this task.

Being a cup-bearer for king Artaxerxes the first, in the year 445 B.C, nearly 13 years after Ezra went to Jerusalem, Nehemiah's brother Hanani (probably a relative) came to him with news concerning the desolation of Jerusalem. His reaction was to resort to prayer, the same way Ezra did before him (Ezra 9).

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|---|---------|
| 1- Nehemiah carries the burdens of his brethren | 1 - 3 |
| 2- A sitting with God | 4 |
| 3- Nehemiah's prayer: | 5 - 11 |
| a- God who keeps His covenant and mercy | 5 |
| b- A confession | 6 - 7 |
| c- Holding fast to God's promises | 8 - 9 |
| d- A cry-out from the heart | 10 – 11 |

1- NEHEMIAH CARRIES THE BURDENS OF HIS BRETHREN:

“ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. It came to pass in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel” (1)

The month of ‘Chislev’ is analogous to the last part of November, and the larger part of December.

Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah, the author of this book, his genealogy is not a long one, not like that of Ezra, for example, for there is no need to go back to the time of Aaron; as Nehemiah was not a priest; Nor to the time of king David, as he was not a king. According to some he was of the tribe of Judah, of the common people.

Three persons were called by the name ‘Nehemiah’: One who returned from the captivity of Babylon to Jerusalem, under the leadership of Zerubbabel (7: 7; Ezra 2: 2); Another the son of Azbuk, who took part in the repair of the wall of Jerusalem (3: 16); and ‘Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah (1: 1; 10: 2; 12: 26).

“Hachaliah”, derived from (Wait upon the Lord); (Hope in the Lord), or (Jehovah is hidden) (Isaiah 8: 17; 23: 20).

Saying to the king: *“the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs”* (2: 3), reveals that Nehemiah belonged to a prominent family in Jerusalem.

“Shushan”; an important city of ‘Elam’ in the south-west of Persia, known to the Greeks as ‘Susa’, in the fertile valley 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. In that time it was a winter resort for the kings, but was extremely hot in summer. Daniel in a vision saw himself as though in Shushan (Daniel 8: 2). When Cyrus invaded Babylon, Shushan fell in the hands of the Persians. Darius made it the capital of his kingdom, and built that great palace described in the Book of Esther 1: 4-6. After the battle of ‘Arabella, Alexander the Great found in it the jewels and treasures of the king;Its glory completely came to an end after the

seventh century AD. In its location nowadays is the village 'Shushan' or 'Susan' between the two rivers Kharga and Olai , east of Babel..

Excavations proved the past existence of that city, and its history narrated in the Holy Book, particularly the Book of Esther. And close to the river in the low land there is a grave assumed to be that of Daniel; and a black pillar on which are engraved the statutes of Hamoraby king of Babylon, which was moved from Babylon by the Elamites.

We should not be amazed to see a holy remnant to the account of the kingdom of God, even in the palaces of evil pagan kings; as, for example, the prophet Moses adopted by Pharaoh's daughter in the palace of the king who gave his command to kill all the male Hebrew newborns. According to the apostle Paul: *"Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians"* (Acts 7: 22); and, *"By faith, Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward"* (Hebrew 11: 24-26)..... Obedaiiah was raised in the house of Ahab, the most evil king of Israel (1 kings 18: 5-16).David was found in the palace of Saul the evil king;Many saints who lived, as though in sanctuaries, while being in royal palaces, full of corruption and oppression, rebuke us.

- + As heaven was put before the sight of Moses, the Egyptian royal palace seemed of little value.....He counted the reproach for the sake of Christ better than the easy living; he cast himself in many dangers by his own free will, when he could live religiously while enjoying a good life; he counted it a sin not to endure affliction together with his people. He forsook the royal palace for he saw before him greater things; counting the reproach of Christ better than the treasures of Egypt.

(St. John Chrysostom)

. *“that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem” (2)*

“Hanani”, A Hebrew name meaning (Generous, merciful), short of ‘Hananiah’.

After the captivity, the people of Israel were called ‘Jews’.

According to the Historian Josephus, while Nehemiah was walking around the walls of the royal palace, he heard some people talking in the tongue of his land, and knowing that they came lately from Judah, he learned from them how Jerusalem came to be in desolation, and how those who returned there from captivity were in a miserable condition. According to some, those men with whom Nehemiah talked, came to Shushan, either to seek help from the Persian throne, or from Nehemiah himself; or came on a business trip between the Jews in Judah and those scattered all over the empire.

Here we stand in awe and appreciation before a man who lived in a royal palace, while his heart was with his afflicted people; a man whose soul would not find comfort while the souls of his brethren moan of suffering; a feeling expressed by the apostle Paul, saying: *“I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen, according to the flesh”* (Romans 9: 3). And was expressed before, by the prophet Moses, sayin to God:: *“Yet now, if You will forgive their sin – but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written”* (Exodus 32: 32).

+ Why should we be amazed to hear that the apostle Paul could wish to be accursed from Christ for the sake of his brethren, if we see Him who, *“being in the form of God, made himself of no reputation, taking the*

form of a bondservant, and came in the like of men” (Philippians 2: 6, 7);.....If Christ Himself became a reproach for the sake of His servants; would it be strange, if one of His servants wish to be accursed for the sake of his brethren?

(The scholar Origen)

“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” (3)

As far as Nehemiah is concerned, he considered the good of the people and that of the city, as two sides of the same coin. The Breaking down of the wall means that the city is wide open before the attack of any enemy. Yet what grieved Nehemiah’s heart more, was not what happened to the walls 140 years ago, on the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, but what happened in Ezra’s days (Ezra 4: 7-23), when the Jews attempted to repair the wall in the days of king Artaxerxes the first, but were opposed by Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe; and the king gave his command to stop the work.

God allowed for such a great affliction to dwell, that things would seem as impossible for a human hand to solve. And in the midst of such an utter helplessness, Nehemiah found no way, except to resort to the refuge in God by praying from the depth of his heart..... In all eras, the people of God were in need of someone to pray for their sake.

The Lord Himself says: *“I will be a wall of fire all around her” (Zechariah 2: 5);* And He says: *“I am the door” (John 10: 9).* The broken down walls and the burnt doors, refer to man’s loss of the strength of God, the Stronghold, and because he

would no more find the true Door through which to reach the bosom of the Father. The wall refers to the power of God working in the believer; and the door to the divine salvation which he enjoys.

2- A SITTING WITH GOD:

“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” (4).

Being aware of the seriousness of the situation, Nehemiah took upon himself to do something about it, not to enter into debates, nor to depend upon his own wisdom and position, but to put it before God of the impossible. As according to the apostle James: *“Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you..... Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up”* (James 4: 8, 10).. The situation was clear before Nehemiah’s eyes; Instead of entering into conflicts, or making certain plans, he, by a contrite heart, sat down before God, being sure that God is close to those with contrite hearts. By saying “I sat”, he means that he forsook all preoccupations to sit with God, and to put before Him such a serious matter, namely the reproach and disgrace which dwelt upon the people of God because of their sins.

By sitting alone with himself, yet in the presence of God, two things were clear before him: His own sins and those of his people on one side, and the faithful promises of God on the other side. Then, his tears flowed, and his heart wailed,by the spirit of hope in the work of God and His salvation; he *“wept and mourned for many days”* .

The psalmist says:

"I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears" (Psalm 6: 6)

"Hear my prayers, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; Do not be silent at my tears, for I am a stranger with You, a sojourner as all my fathers were" (Psalm 39: 12)

"My tears have been my food day and night; while they continually say to me: 'Where is your God?'" (Psalm 42: 3)

"You number my wanderings. Put my tears into Your bottle; Are they not in Your book" (Psalm 56: 8)

"You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in great measure" (Psalm 80: 5)

"For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping" (Psalm 102: 9)

"Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy" (Psalm 126: 5).

+ The Lord Himself wept over Jerusalem, when she did not intend to weep over herselfHe wishes for us to weep in order to flee from perdition.

Whoever weeps much in this world will be saved in the future; *"The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth"* (Ecclesiastes 7: 4) And the Lord Himself said:

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6: 21).

Let us then weep for some time, to rejoice forever. Let us fear the Lord and wait for Him; Let us confess our sins; let us return from our evil ways; lest we may hear the words: *"Woe to me!The faithful man has*

perished from the earth, and there is no more upright among men” (Micah 7: 1-2).

(St. Ambrose)

- + The extended prayer and the dense tears draw God to mercy.
- + Weeping alone will lead to the blessed joy.
- + Intending to refer all the blessings to Himself, Jesus says: *“Blessed are those who weep”*; He Himself wept to establish this blessing.

(The scholar Origen)

As his tears revealed the grief of his heart on his own condition, and that of his people, together with his hope in the Lord, Nehemiah was committed to fast and to pray.During captivity, fasting and praying became very common; as a memorial of the desolation of Jerusalem, and of the murder of Gedaliah (Isaiah 4: 16; Daniel 9: 3; 10: 3; Zechariah 7: 3-7).

- + When desolation was about to dwell on the whole race of queen Esther, Nothing corrupted the evil plot of the tyrant, except fasting and prayer to God, by which the perdition of the people turned into keeping them in peace (Esther 4: 16).

(St. Pope Athanasius the apostolic)

- + In His hunger (Christ), the devil approached to tempt Him, to teach you the greatness of fasting, being the greater shield against the devil. That is why, after baptism, the people are committed to go, not to a life of licentiousness, food, drink, and full banquets, but to fasting.Jesus fasted, not out of need to do, but to teach us For without the control of the belly, Adam was driven out of paradise; the great flood happened in the days of Noah; and fire came upon Sodom. That is what the prophet Ezekiel meant by saying: *"This was the iniquity of Sodom: pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness"* (Ezekiel 16: 49). In the same way the Jews have gone deep (Isaiah 5: 11, 12)

(St. John Chrysostom)

- + The greatest ways to make the demons flee from you, are fasting and endurance of affliction; for it the demons enter into the bodies of men for the sake of a fellowship of pleasures, it is obvious that they will flee by the endurance of affliction.

3- NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER:

Nehemiah presents to us a magnificent model of prayer

- a- Proclaiming the true concept of prayer in difficult times: he begins his prayer with a confession of the sins of the whole people, counting himself one of them, and sharing with them their sins. Then he reminds God of His divine promises. And ends it with a personal request from God to give him favor in the sight of the king; not for the sake of his own benefit, but of the glory of God, and the edification of the people.Nehemiah's prayer is a liturgical prayer, he uttered in the name of the whole congregation, and

wrote to express the religious life of the Jews, and their faith in God, who listens and responds to His children, even for little requests.

- b- Together with his prayers for a long time for the sake of the affliction that dwelt upon the people of God, Nehemiah, here, practices what we call the “arrow prayer”; in which he lifts his heart up to God, while being in the presence of the king, before seeking anything from the later.
- + The prayer is like using the pump by all hands to save the boat from sinking. We use our voices when we say to God: *Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us*” (Luke 11: 4); and we use our hands when “*we share our bread with the hungry, and bring to our house the poor who are cast out....*” (Isaiah 58: 7)..... When we do good to the poor, he will intercede for us before the Lord (See Sirach 29: 12).

(St. Augustine)

- + “*The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal*” (Sirach 35: 21). It opens heavens and approaches the divine throne, borne by the archangel Gabriel who offers them before God. As a result of such a prayer the depths threw out the prophet Jonah, and the big fish brought him safely to the shore.
- + When Daniel prayed, his prayers shut the lions’ mouths. He said to king Darius: “*My God sent His angel and shut the lions’ mouths, so that they have not hurt me*” (Daniel 6: 22). They stretched their paws and received Daniel to keep him from falling on the hard ground; embraced him, and

kissed his feet. And when Daniel stood to pray and raised his hands up to heaven, the lions imitated him.

And despite the fact that the dungeon was covered and sealed, yet light shone in it for the sake of Daniel, which the lions were pleased to see. And when Daniel intended to sleep. The lions stretched their bodies to make a soft bed for Daniel to lie on. The dungeon was more illuminated than an upper room with many windows. There, Daniel raised more prayers than the three times a day he usually did in his upper room (Daniel 6: 10). And when he finally triumphed, and those who accused him were cast into the dungeon in his place, the lions' mouths were opened, devoured them, and crushed their bones.

(St. Aphrahat)

A- God keeps His covenant and mercy:

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

In prayer, Nehemiah found a refuge and a way to overcome the impossible. He managed to approach God in his prayer through three things:

- 1- He knew about God that He is **"The great and awesome God of heaven"**, who moves everything, and who cares for His heavenly and earthly creations; The expression *"the great and awesome God"* was used often during the period after the captivity. For, having lost Jerusalem the

city of God, and Solomon's temple, which they counted as the most holy place in the world; the Jews started to call the Lord the "*God of heaven*", to which no enemy can approach, break down its walls, nor captivate its inhabitants.....He is "*the Great and Awesome God*"; as He Himself said to His prophet Moses: "*You shall not be terrified of them, for the Lord your God, the great and awesome God, is among you*" (Deuteronomy 7: 21).

- 2- **"Who keeps His covenant"** He who gave the law to Moses, and proclaimed: "*Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments*" (Deuteronomy 7: 9). The expression "**God is faithful**" is very beloved by the old Jews; which they understand that God is faithful in keeping His promise to keep them as His own people, to whom are the exalted divine promises; and see, in the faithfulness of some believers, an image of the faithfulness of God.
- 3- **"Compassionate and merciful"** (Hebrew 4: 16), with those who love Him and keep His commandments. Although He is above man, yet He is close to him, and listens to him, the way man listens to his friend.

By analyzing Nehemiah's prayer, the following is shown:

- a- His prayer reveals an active personal relationship between him and the Lord his God. Prayer is not just words in the air, but true talk to God.
- b- Like Ezra, Nehemiah, in his prayer, talks on the tongue of the whole people; he counts what dwell on them as dwelling on him personally; he confesses his own sins, as well as those of the people, and the Jewish nation as a whole (6-7).
- c- He remembers the warnings of God, and holds fast to His divine promises (8-9).
- d- He resorts to the covenant with God and His salvation work with His people (10)

e- He raises a personal request to gain strength and success in his future work(11).

The fruit he seeks of such a humble prayer; is that God would move the events to what is for his benefit and that of his people, and would grant him the strength to work.

+ God, being faithful, means that we can trust in His own proclamation about Himself.

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

B- A confession:

“ please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel

Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father’s house and I have sinned” (6)

Not excluding himself and his father’s house from confessing their sins, Nehemiah counts the sins of his people as his own sins (6-7); and their need for the divine help, as his needs (11).

“The prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night”:

Sin lies in forgetting God, while hope is bound to remembering His mercy and promises.

Our feeling of the greatness and awe of God, motivate us to confess our sins; the way Isaiah did when he saw the glory of God filled the temple, and the house was filled with smoke, he said: *“Woe to me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts”* (Isaiah 6: 5). And when Simon Peter perceived the authority of the Lord Jesus upon the sea and fish, *“He fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’”* (Luke 5: 8)

- + Let us supplicate to the Savior of our souls to break down our bonds, to take away from us this cruel imprisonment; to grant us liberation from the burden of our iron chains, and to make our souls lighter than any wing. Yet, while supplicating to Him, we are committed, on our side, to have an exalted fiery zeal; for by it, we can, in a short time, be set free of the evil that press on us, to perceive our past condition, and to hold fast to the liberty that came to be ours, which we get as a gift from God by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His love for mankind; for whom be the glory and the authority forever, Amen.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses” (7)

Confessing his own sins and those of his people, Nehemiah asks God to listen and to see; to grant repentance and purification.We need to confess our sins, to glorify God the forgiver of sins.

+ Confess, O man, your sins, to get forgiveness; *“State your case, that you may be acquitted”* (Isaiah 43: 26 LXX)..... Why would you be ashamed to confess your sins, so long as you were born in them? (Psalm 51:7)

He who denies his transgression and refrains from confessing it, actually denies his birth..... Let the sinner, and the unholy confess; And let the righteous not boast nor be haughty; lest he would loose the reward of his righteousness by his pride (Job 10: 15).

(St. Ambrose)

C- Holding fast to God’s promises:

“Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations” (8)

The word **“Remember”**, the key of the book, is often repeated (4: 14; 5: 19; 6: 14; 13: 14, 22, 29, 31). After the Babylonian invasion, the Jews became scattered over several locations. According to some, at the beginning of the new covenant, the number of the Jews scattered all over the world, exceeded those who were in the promised land (John 7: 35; Acts 2: 9-11; James 1: 1; 1 Peter 1: 1).

“but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place

which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name”(9)

“I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling place for My name” This divine promise came in many locations (Deuteronomy 30: 1-5; Isaiah 11: 12; Isaiah 23: 3 etc.)

God’s commandment to His people was not to worship idols, nor to partake in the temples of idols: *“You shall not worship the Lord your God with such things. But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go”* (Deuteronomy 12: 4-5).

D- A cry-out from the heart:

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

Together with confessing the sins of the people as a whole including himself and his father’s household, Nehemiah holds fast to the fact that they are all the servants of the Lord and His people, not out of their worthiness, but for the sake of the salvation He presented to them by His divine power and strong hand. Nehemiah sets forth from the present, goes back to the past, and looks forward to the future, to see the fulfillment of God’s promise when He will gather His people from all over the earth to bring them back to Jerusalem. That was what the prophets said, who saw the good news of the Messianic Kingdom reorganizing the people in the holy city; like Jeremiah who said: *“I will gather the remnant of My flock out of the countries where I have driven them....I will set up shepherds over themOn them a king shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness on earth”* (Jeremiah 23: : 3-8); See Ezekiel 37: 21-28).

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

*this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this
man; for I was a king’s cup-bearer.” (11)*

He sought the divine intervention; as without His blessing and grace, there would be no salvation.

“A king’s cup-bearer: The expression here indicates that he was one of the king’s cup-bearers, and not the only one. The king’s cup-bearer, who was usually an eunuch, was a post that goes back to the old times, that had its special honor in the Persian royal court; For, in his turn of duty, he used to stand daily in the presence of the king, to serve his personal needs; and had many chances to enjoy the kindness and pleasure of the king more than anyone else. In many of the Assyrian inscriptions, we see the king’s cup-bearer holding a cup in his left hand, and a fan in his right hand to drive the flying insects away, and putting on his shoulder an embroidered long towel for the king to wipe his mouth after drinking wine. The king’s cup-bearer in Persia and Mades used to pour a little sip of wine in the cup in his left hand and drink it, to assure the king that it is not poisoned, and is safe to drink..... The Pharaohs, as well as king Solomon used to have their cup-bearers (Genesis 40: 2; 1 Kings 10: 5; 2 Chronicles 9: 4).

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 1

LIFT MY HEART UP TO YOU

AND LET IT BE WIDE WITH LOVE FOR ALL MANKIND

- + You came down, O true Love, to us from heaven;
You longed to bear all mankind in Your bosoms;
And to lift all of them up to Your exalted love;
Grant me to walk by Your Spirit;
Let my soul ascend to You, as You descended to her;
Let my heart be wide with love for all mankind;
I wish all would enjoy Your glories

- + All the glories of the world have no place in me;
For Your glory has captivated me;
My depths cry out to You;
When will I see all my human brethren in Your bosoms?
When will You surround all mankind like a wall of divine fire?
So that the devil with all his fiery arrows would not be able to approach
them;
When will You dwell in our midst, that Your glory be proclaimed in us;
This work is greater than to be done by any man;
Not even by the heavenly hosts with their exalted abilities;
For it is Your divine work, O Savior of the world;
For You are the God of the impossible.

- + Let me retreat from the world for some time;
To sit in Your divine presence;

To confess to You that we have corrupted our inner Jerusalem with our sins;

Who will grant us the repentance but Your Holy Spirit?

For by Your grace we can arise to build its walls and set her doors;

Your promises are true and faithful forever

+ In the midst of the royal palace of the pagan king, You prepared Nehemiah to become the unique leader;

He sought from You to grant him favor in the sight of the king to allow him to work'

You granted him the grace that the king gave him all support to work;

From You, his success; was realized;

He set forth to work, not through the king's permission, but rather by Your company with him;

Accompany us, O Lord, to get attached to You;

Proclaim Yourself in us, and set Your Jerusalem in our depths;

For You are our wall and stronghold.

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CHAPTER 2

“COME AND LET US BUILD THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM”

NEHEMIAH, A MAN OF PRAYER AND WORK:

According to some this chapter is the greatest lesson in the wise leadership in the whole world; or at least a great one. It reveals to us that God wishes to work by us more than our own wish to work.

Nehemiah, beside being a man of prayer, was a practical man; he did not move to build, before seeking from the king messages that would support him to start and consummate the work 2: 7, 8..

1- Nehemiah sets forth to work	1 - 3
2- Nehemiah's "arrow prayer"	4
3- Nehemiah's work plan	5 - 8
4- Nehemiah's practical execution of his plan	9
5- The opposition of the enemy	10
6- Nehemiah explores the situation	11 - 16
7- Nehemiah calls for a collective work	17 - 18
8- The enemies laughed at the Jews and despised them	19 – 20

1- NEHEMIAH SETS FORTH TO WORK:

“And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before” (1)

The month of **Nisan** covers a part of March and another of April.

The duration between hearing the sad news of Jerusalem in the month of 'Chisleb', and standing here before the king in the month of Nisan, was about

four months. Nehemiah did not hasten to put the matter before the king, despite being sure of that the later trusted in him; until he gets a divine strength and support. He probably also waited until his turn comes to carry out his job as the king's cup-bearer.

"Therefore the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart; So I became dreadfully afraid" (2)

The workers in the royal court were committed to appear before the king, with a cheerful countenance, under all circumstances. But it was not possible for Nehemiah to conceal the bitterness that filled his soul because of the miserable conditions reached by Jerusalem and its inhabitants.. Having trust in Nehemiah, king Artaxerxes inquired from him the reason for his depression; for he used to see him always exultant, which always reflected in gladness in the king's heart. Nehemiah's peace of heart was most probably different from the gladness that the others show; for Nehemiah received his gladness from the Lord, and did not pretend to be to please the king.

It was not possible for Nehemiah who had a broken heart for the sake of his people, to hide his grief; according to the words of the wise Solomon: *"A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance"* (Ecclesiastes 3: 4).. The true believer knows when to rejoice and when to mourn.

- + As laughing is sometimes worthy of commendation, and other times of rebuke; weeping should be seen in the same way. Most probably in the covetous life, the one who laughs sets himself a god.Some count their belly a god, and other their riches, and still others may laugh in an attempt to show off a sense of humor.

Anyway those who weep a lot for the sake of repentance, would reach the true God according to the following words: *"You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in great measure"*

(Psalm 80: 5).

According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, the godly believer grieves by his body, and dances by his spirit; the way David's soul did and exulted before the ark of the covenant (2 Samuel 6: 14-17)

The most prominent element for the believer is to use every convenient chance to work..... When the king inquired from Nehemiah about the reason for his grief, "*he became dreadfully afraid*"; but raising his heart up to God, he was encouraged to reply to the king with openness and wisdom; that a prior royal decree has put an end to any attempts to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem (Ezra 4: 6-24) . Nehemiah was not ashamed to admit his fear, but did not let it keep him from doing the work to which the Lord has called him.So did Esther, and in her prayer, she sought from God to save her from her fear.

+ One may fear of being scourged, which is the fear of slaves; or of losing his wages, which is the fear of a hired hand; but fear of committing sin, is the fear of the righteous.

(St. (Mar) Philoxinus)

+ I am not afraid of my enemies, but I dreadfully fear the death as a judgment by your Word.

(St. Athanasius the apostolic)

+ Why do you fear, O Christians? When Christ Himself says: *“Be of good cheer; It is I, do not be afraid”* (Matthew 14: 27) He told you beforehand that those things are going to happen. Having recognized Him, his disciples exulted, and consented to have Him in the boat; and they they instantly came to their destination (Matthew 14: 34)

(St. Augustine)

“and I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?” (3)

“May the king live forever” the way the kings were addressed at the time (1 kings 1: 31; 2: 4; 3: 9). Wisely, Nehemiah did not mention the name of the city “Jerusalem”, but called it *“the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs”*. On one aspect

he did not want to stir up the king's anger, by requesting the revival of a city that was destroyed by Babylon, and that an old decree issued by the king stopped the repair of the city and its walls. And on another aspect he intended to please him, because the Persian kings used to have reverence for the tombs; and the dead..

At the beginning of his reign the king did not feel comfortable to allow a fortified city in Judah, which would most probably encourage movements of revolt against the kingdom of Persia. But now, even though the situation greatly stabilized; beside that the king had trust in Nehemiah and his loyalty to him; yet Nehemiah refrained from mentioning the name of the city, to avoid stirring up the old feelings of the king; that reforming Jerusalem was analogous to having a revolt against the Persian throne.

When he talked to God, Nehemiah, likewise, did not mention the name of the city; for he was not preoccupied, like a bigot, with the city itself, he therefore called it by the name beloved by God, namely *"the place I have chosen as a dwelling for My name"* (1: 9; Deuteronomy 30: 1-5).

2- NAHMIEH'S ARROW PRAYER:

Together with our wish to use every chance to work, we need to pray, to perceive what is God's will in every work we do. ... Nehemiah was well aware that a king's cup-bearer was not allowed to suggest anything to the king, nor seek anything from him. But having raised his heart to God, the Lord instructed him to go ahead and talk openly to the king.

"Then the king said to me, "What do you request; So I prayed to the God of heaven" (4)

Nehemiah felt while standing before the king, that he was in the presence of the God of heaven, who is able to direct the king's heart according to His will;

....who; alone, can hear the silent words of the heart;and who grants him the wise response to the king's question, and to find favor in his eyes

This book includes several examples of Nehemiah's prayers that endured for as long as four months (1: 4); after which, standing before the king, he raised what is called "a quick arrow prayer" (2: 4); namely a hidden prayer of the heart – the prayer of Jesus.But, was it possible for such a prayer to have activity, unless Nehemiah, himself, was a man of prayer?!

+ By the heart we ask; by the heart we seek; and before the voice of the heart the door is opened.

+ By prayer the mind full of love would reach God; for it preoccupies the mind, the heart, the desire to know, and to love. The perfect life of the good Christian is a holy desire.

+ Whoever fervently prays, praises God in his heart, even though his tongue may be silent. Otherwise, if man prays without longing, even though his voice would reach the ears of men, yet he would be as mute before

God

(St. Augustine)

3- NEHEMIAH'S WORK PLAN:

Nehemiah knew exactly what to seek from the king, why; and what were his needs to fulfill his goal. He had a specific plan to put before the king, which he put before God, or rather received from God

“And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it” (5)

“Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), “How long will your journey be? And when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time” (6)

Here, he, still, did not mention the name of the city, he just sought to be sent to Judah, to the city of his fathers’ tombs.

“The queen”, here, refers to the queen-mother, who had the right to be present beside the king, and had high honor with him The book of Nehemiah, in particular, reveals the role of women beside men (Nehemiah 3: 12; 5: 1-5; 8: 2-3; 10: 31; 12: 43). It so seemed that Nehemiah found it wiser to ask the king first for a short leave of absence to fulfill his mission, and if necessary to ask him later to extend it. After a leave of absence of a period of 12 years, as the governor over Judah (5: 14); Nehemiah came back to submit a report to the king, then returned to Judah (13: 6)

“Furthermore I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah” (7)

It was the custom for the prominent personalities to carry letters of recommendation from the ruler, to be able to move with security within the limits of the State; and those who read the letter were committed to give all assistance to its bearer. By such letters of recommendations, Nehemiah could move safely in all the countries within the Persian Empire.

Beside the good plan, he was in need of a divine power to support him – the good mighty hand of God, according to the words of the apostle: *“To Him who is*

able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Ephesians 3: 20).

“and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and

for the house that I will occupy. And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me” (8)

The word “**Asaph**” means (God gathers). And from

“**The king’s forest**”, most probably in Lebanon, famed for the cedar forests (1 kings 5: 6; 9; 2 Chronicles 2: 8-9, 16; Ezra 3: 7), Nehemiah planned to seek wood for the roof of the palace and for the city wall; According to some, the word translated here as “forest”, is Persian for (garden). In Egypt, the word ‘Ganna’ or ‘Geneina’ means (garden)..According to some the garden of Solomon in Etham, 6 miles south of Jerusalem was known for its great beauty (2 kings 25: 4; Ecclesiastes 2: 5-9; Jeremiah 39: 4; 52: 7).

4- NEHEMIAH’S PRACTICAL EXECUTION OF HIS PLAN:

“Then I went to the governors in the region beyond the River, and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me” (9)

Nehemiah instantly moved, and did not delay like Ezra (Ezra 8: 22); accompanied with captains of the army and horsemen; not that he had less faith than Ezra, but on account of his official position as the new Governor of Judah, and of that he was the man cherished by the king, whom everyone is committed to give respect and reverence.

5- THE OPPOSITION OF THE ENEMY:

."When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel" (10)

It is befitting of us to work according to the will of God, even if all stood against us. The obstacles should not restrain our souls, but should rather motivate us more,..... We need to have confidence and faith, as long as we do the work of God; we should not fear opposition whatever be their source; but deal with it with confidence that God is on our side.

Sanballat the Horonite"; Sanballat is an Acadian name, meaning (whom the god of the moon gives life). He is called "the Horonite", either because he belongs to "Beth Horon" in Ephraim 30 kilometers north-west of Jerusalem (Joshua 10: 10); or more probably because he was from 'Horonaim' the Moabite city (Isaiah 15: 5; Jeremiah 48: 3, 5, 34).

Sanballat, pretending to be a worshipper of the God of the Jews, gave his two sons: 'Delayah' and Shelemayah', names bound to 'Jehovah'. ... As a governor of Samaria, north of Judah; he was the strongest opponent of Nehemiah, who opposed the building of the city wall, probably because of all or some of the following reasons:

- a- That Nehemiah was opposing a prior royal decree that put an end to any such a project; **namely for a political reason**; he counted what Nehemiah was going to do as a revolt and a rebellion against Persia (17-20).
- b- He feared that Nehemiah's work would probably lessen the submission of the Jews to Persia; and extending to Samaria would make the Persians

- use force, that might put him in an awkward position, being the governor of Samaria.
- c- By building a wall around Jerusalem, the city will be closed before free trade – **namely for an economic reason**
 - d- By building the wall of Jerusalem, the temple will not be accessible, except before the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the near vicinity – **namely for a religious reason.**
 - e- Coming bearing a royal decree, Nehemiah surpassed Sanballat's authority as the governor of Samaria; and he felt indignant– **namely for personal reason.**
 - f- According to some, Sanballat opposed the building of the wall of Jerusalem, on account of that it was his hidden intention to extend his authority to include Judah together with Samaria; and certain documents revealed that he had great animosity against the Jews.

Tobiah: thought to be a governor of Ammon across the Jordan east of Judah. The word “the Ammonite slave” (according to some versions) means that that he was once a slave, (6: 17-19; 13: 4-9), before he entered into familial relationship with some people of authority in Jerusalem.He also probably pretended to be a worshipper of Jehovah.

6- NEHEMIAH EXPLORES THE SITUATION:

“So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days” (11)

Despite the fact that Nehemiah came to Jerusalem accompanied with captains of the army and horsemen, for a mission to the benefit of the Jews, yet Sanballat

and Tobiah and all the rulers of the region around Judah, knew nothing about the nature of his mission. He even remained three days before any of them were aware of his arrival.

With wisdom, but not with despair, Nehemiah dealt with what he was going to face of serious opposition; not in haste to proclaim his plan of work, except for just enough according to the need, with no showing off of heroism or a desire for fame..... As a matter of fact, Nehemiah was in need for those three days to relax after such a long journey (See Ezra 8: 32).

Nehemiah did not depend on the knowledge he has already got about the actual situation, but set forth to explore everything by himself.

The figure 3, referring to the resurrection of Christ; means that we cannot work for the edification of our inner Jerusalem or its wall, unless we enjoy the resurrected life by the Lord Christ.

+` Abraham, knowing by the spirit of prophecy that he represented certain issues to come; and that Christ will come from his seed, to offer himself a sacrifice for the sake of the salvation of the whole world, and for the sake of the resurrection from the dead,... walked three days to reach the location assigned to him by God to offer his own son a sacrifice (Genesis 22: 4).

The third day is the most convenient day for the sacraments. The children of Israel offered a sacrifice to God on the third day after their exodus from the land of Egypt (Exodus 3: 18).

+ Pharaoh refrained to let the children of Israel go to the place of the signs, and intended to keep them from enjoying the secrets of the third day.Listen to what the prophet say: *"After two days, the Lord will revive us.. On the third day He will raise us up, that we will live in His sight"* (Hosea 6: 3).

The first day for us is the passion of the Savior

The second day is when He descended to Hades

The third day is when He resurrected

That is why on the third day, the Lord walked before the children of Israel in a pillar of cloud by day, and of fire by night. As we already said, the apostle Paul teaches us that these words hide the secret of baptism., saying: *“As many of us were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death”* (Romans 6: 3, 4). When you meditate in the secret of the third day, God Himself will guide you, and will reveal to you the way to salvation.

“Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem; nor was there any animal with me, except the one on which I rode” (12)

Many start their work, but do not consummate it, because they talk much about it to people, and not to God, the Grantor of conquest and success..Nehemiah, however, started his work very cautiously;. went out by night with few men to view the walls of Jerusalem by the light of the moon.

“And I went out by night through the Valley Gate to the Serpent Well and the Refuse Gate, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire” (13)

He did not make a full round around the entire city, but it was enough for him to view to what extent the wall in the south was still intact. As Jerusalem has always been attacked from the north, there were only few remains of the wall in the North.

The serpent Well; was so called because there was a statue of a serpent with water flowing from its mouth.

The refuse gate; where the inhabitants used to cast the trash; about 2000 cubits from the Valley Gate.

“Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool, but there was no room for the animal under me to pass” (14)

“So I went up in the night by the valley, and viewed the wall; then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned” (15)

“And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work” (16)

It is amazing that Nehemiah arrived at Jerusalem, stayed three days, then moved by night by the light of the moon, to explore the situation, without telling anyone, even those close to him; for he was not comfortable with showing off or boasting himself. He did not wish to draw attention to what he intended to do, so as not to stir up the enemies to plan any thing against him before he starts the work.....Together with his faith that what he is going to do was by a call from God; being a man of God, he was committed to walk by wisdom, so as not to stir up any trouble, as much as possible.

7- NEHEMIAH CALLS FOR COLLECTIVE WORK:

“Then I said to them, “You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we

may no longer be a reproach” (17)

Once it was time to set forth to work, he started to tell those who will work with him, about the miserable condition reached by the people of God; and about the good hand of God.

Nehemiah counted the collapse of the city of Jerusalem, as a collapse of the people themselves, and their fall into reproach.

The wall and gates of Jerusalem were in desolation, since they were destroyed on the hand of Nebuchadnezzar more than 140 years ago, despite some unsuccessful attempts to repair them. Although the leaders and the people completely surrendered to the matter of fact; Nehemiah, on the other hand knew no surrender, believing that God is capable to work by him.

“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” (18)

Showing the seriousness of the situation, he sought the cooperation of all; for it was not his work alone, nor that of a certain category of leadership, but it was a work for all, both the leaders and the people.. On another aspect, despite having a royal decree to work with, he did not order them to work, but talked to them with the language of love, friendship, and appreciation.

Nehemiah’s strong spirit, and holding fast to the good hand of God, reflected upon all his listeners, who decided to start work with enthusiasm. Here, Nehemiah demonstrated the following foundations of the collective work::

- a- It touches the life of the whole people
- b- It is not a work for one man, but, if possible of all the leaders and people
- c- The good hand of God has already started to work, and will keep supporting those who work
- d- The king himself responded to this divine work

- e- They are committed to carry it out, not with slothfulness, but with strong hands.

9- THE ENEMIES LAUGHED AT THE JEWS AND DESPISED THEM:

“But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, “What is this thing that you are doing?

Will you rebel against the king?” (19)

Geshem the Arab; who joined forces with Sanballat and Tobiah, was a ruler of a congregation of Arabs who lived across the Jordan in the region of Edom, and Negeb, South, and South-East of Judah. Those three, who surrounded Judah, on the North, East, and South, feared that the fortifying Jerusalem would make them lose their authority over Judah; beside the fact that each of them had hidden hope to have it under his authority.....For the sake of their common interest, the three of them joined forces to plot a unified plan to corrupt the work; which they started, by laughing at the Jews and despising them..

“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” (20)

The success of the work was not a gift from the king, but from the God of heaven.

And as the three of the opponents did not belong to the tribes of the children of Israel, and would never seek from their hearts what is good for them, they, accordingly deprived themselves of the blessing to belong, nor to dwell in Jerusalem.

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 2

HERE I AM, SEND ME

+ Who is worthy to stretch his hand to work in Your vineyard, O Lord?

Here I am, Send me, the way You sent Nehemiah;

Grant me the spirit of prayer;

To enjoy Your leadership, and Your work through me;

Teach me the true language of prayer;

Train my heart on the secret talk with You;

For You long to listen to the pure heart.

+ The king of Persia sent Nehemiah;

And sent with him captains of the army and horsemen;

And provided him with letters of recommendation to the rulers;

But Nehemiah was moving under Your shadow;

He counted every success as from You.

+ You are the King of kings, the Leader of the whole history;

I shall not move without You;
You promised to be a wall of fire around me;
So that the hosts of darkness would not be able to force themselves on
me;
You send Your angels to support me;
You grant me grace and prosperity in any work my hand may stretch to
do.

+ Grant me wisdom from You;
To do everything, little and great, by Your guidance.

+ Teach me how to work together with my brethren and fathers;
Let us build the walls of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach'
Strengthen our hands for the good;
Glory be to You, O God of heaven;
By You, we, Your servants, stand, and build without ceasing.

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CHAPTER 3

DIVISION OF LABOR AND SETTING THE GATES

This chapter is considered one of the most important in the Old Testament that helps to understand the topography of the city of Jerusalem. Covering the plan of rebuilding the wall, it starts by the Eastern Gate, then moving toward the West around the city. Nehemiah, seeing that not the entire wall was in a bad shape, and perceiving that the work has to be done as quickly as possible, he entrusted the work in every section of the wall to a specific group of workers. With few exceptions, the will to work was extremely strong. Nobody claimed that he has already finished what was sought from him, but all were ready to be engaged in a new part (4: 2; 5: 27).

In Nehemiah's diaries, there came a list, most probably quoted from the records of the temple, that describes the entire wall around Jerusalem, with signs of the main landmarks, like gates, towers, storehouses of weapons, etc.....And many of the workers in the rebuilding of the wall were mentioned by name, by their family name, by their specific roles, or by their dwelling places.

Some sections of the wall rebuilt under Nehemiah were recently discovered, with a thickness of 8 feet (Nehemiah 6: 15). These new excavations show that the city within the wall was smaller than what was previously thought; probably embracing a part of the city of David before the captivity, south-east of the hill looking over the Kedron Valley. And that the city surrounded by the wall rebuilt by Nehemiah, did not include the entire inhabitants of Jerusalem; for some inhabitants dwelt outside the rebuilt wall.

It is noticed that Ezra was not mentioned as a leader of the work; for most probably he was working together with Eliashib the high priest (1);And that some of the workers came from outside Judah.

This chapter refers to 10 gates of the wall of Jerusalem, all of which refer to the Person of the Lord Christ who said: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, 'I am the door of the sheep..... I am the door; if anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture"* (John 10: 7, 9).

- 1- **The Sheep Gate (1):** The Lord Christ came to be the Lamb of God to bears the sin of the world, and to offer Himself a sacrifice for the sake of His rational flock (Isaiah 53: 7; John 1: 29)
- 2- **The Fish Gate: (3).** According to the scholar Tertullian, the Lord Christ is the big fish; and we are the small fish that cannot live out of the blessings of the waters of baptism. By the big fish we became the fishers of men, and not of fish (Matthew 4: 19; Proverbs 11: 30; Daniel 12: 3).
- 3- **The Old Gate: (6).** If the Lord Christ has come in the fullness of time, yet He is the Eternal who loved us and planned for our salvation before the foundation of the world. He is the Old Gate, through whom, by faith our early fathers entered. We are committed to enter together with them, and to walk in their footsteps, as it came in the book of Jeremiah: *"Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls"* (Jeremiah 6: 16).
- 4- **The Valley Gate (13):** If the Lord Christ wants us to be solid and unshakable holy mountains; but by love, we descend with Him as though to the low valley to search for every soul with the spirit of humility, and to carry them with the spirit of love (Luke 14: 11; Philippians 2: 3, 4; 1 Peter 5: 5, 6).
- 5- **The Refuse Gate (14):** Through which we carry the unclean things and cast them out of the city; the way the Lord Christ carried our sins, was crucified outside the camp, to bring us forth into the heavenly city – the High Jerusalem.
- 6- **The Fountain Gate (15):** The open side of the Lord Christ became a spring or fountain that flows blood and water for our sanctification. He calls

us to receive in us the fountain of His Holy Spirit (John 7: 38, 39; Ephesians 5: 18).

- 7- **The Water Gate** (26): When Ezra read the book of law before the people, they assembled before the Water Gate (8: 1-9). For the Word of God gathers us together to enjoy the fountain of His Holy Spirit.
- 8- **The Horse Gate** (28): The priests repaired it; for having become priests for the God of His Father, (Revelation 1: 8), we are committed to become the warriors of Christ fighting as though with horses; to enjoy unceasing conquests (2 Timothy 2: 3; 4: 7; Ephesians 6: 11-18).
- 9- **The East Gate** (31, 32): The Savior was called “The East” (Malachi 4: 2); who ascended on the East, and so He will come. Our sight is perpetually directed toward His second coming, to enjoy the splendor of His glory.:
- 10- **The Nethinim (the Miphcad) Gate** (31-32): It was probably the gate where the elders used to sit for judgment; as a reference to the Lord Christ, by whom we judge everything, and not be judged.

1- The Sheep Gate	1 - 2
2- The Fish Gate	3 - 5
3- The Old Gate	6 - 12
4- The Valley Gate	13
5- The Refuse Gate	14
6- The Fountain Gate	15 - 25
7- The Water Gate	26 - 27
8- The Horse Gate	28
9- The East Gate	29
10-The Nethinim (or the Miphcad) Gate	31 – 32

THE SHEEP GATE:

It starts by the Northern section (1-7), then the Western (8-13), then the Southern (14), and finally the Eastern (15-32)

The work was wisely organized, under the supervision of the chief priest Eliashib who dedicated the work, and in which all the inhabitants took part: the individuals, the houses, the craftsmen, those of the city, and those of the country, the priests, and the commons. The enthusiasm was great, and the fellowship was complete; with the exception of some opponents and adversaries. But Nehemiah convinced the high priest to start the work, and the leaders and people followed suit. The wall was divided into 42 sections, every group of people were given the responsibility to repair or to rebuild a specific section. In those who worked we notice:

- 1- The work started by the high priest and the priests.
- 2- Many of them came from cities outside Jerusalem to take part.
- 3- Judah was divided into five divisions, each of two sections.
- 4- People of all professions took part including goldsmiths, and even perfumers, and other traders
- 5- The Levites were among the workers
- 6- Women and children took part
- 7- Also did the musicians and the singers of the temple..

Mentioning the names of those who took part in rebuilding the wall of the city refers to the fact, that those who work to the account of the kingdom of God, leaning on the arm of God, and not caring for the opposition of the enemies, their names will be written in the book of life.

“Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They built as far as the Tower of the Hundred, and consecrated it, then as far as the Tower of Hananel” (1)

It was not easy for Eliashib the high priest, who was like the governor of the city, to start the work, on account of the fact that his daughter was married to the grandson of Sanballat the leader of the opposition (Nehemiah 3: 28). The Lord Christ says, that man's enemies may be found among his own household.

Eliashib; a Hebrew name meaning (Whom God wants), was the son of Joiakim (12: 10). He also entered into a familial relationship with Tobiah the Emmonite; for whom he assigned a chamber in the temple (13: 5).

They started by the Sheep gate, north of the temple, close to the north-east corner, through which the sacrifices offered to the temple entered. Let us start by worshipping God.

The tower of the hundred; so called probably on account of that its height was 100 cubits, or was guarded by 100 men, or its staircase had 100 steps.

The tower of Hananil; (Jeremiah 31; 38; Zechariah 14: 15). at the far north end of the city. Those two towers were bound to the stronghold of the temple, to confront any attack on the city from the North.

The high priest and the priests did not just gave orders, but worked by their hands together with the people. Assigning the high priests and the priests to lead the work procession, and to start by building the Sheep Gate, was not given haphazardly, but through a spiritual wisdom. For, if Jerusalem with its wall refers to Jerusalem of the heart, namely to setting the kingdom of God in man; it would then be befitting of the priests to be only preoccupied with the spiritual building of the soul, to the account of the kingdom of Christ. As to the Sheep Gate, through which the offerings and the sacrifices entered, it refers to the care of the priests for the unique sacrifice of the cross, for the sake of their own salvation, and for that of the people.

- + All the priests at that time were committed by the law of God to offer first a sacrifice for their own sins, then offer sacrifices for the sins of the people.
....By the sacrifice of prayer, now, we perceive that we are not without sin; hence we say every day: "*Forgive us our trespasses*"; the same way the

priests in the old, through their commitment to offer animal sacrifice for their own sin, perceived that they were not without sin (Leviticus 9: 7).

(St. Augustine)

The priests perpetually start by building the Sheep Gate; for they should not be preoccupied with anything beside offering the Lord Christ the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

- + The perfect servant of Christ has nothing beside Christ.

(St. Jerome)

Beside offering the Lamb of God to everyone, they desire to die with Christ, in love for their brethren.

- + Whoever has the spirit and thought of priesthood, beside being a good shepherd, he goes ahead to death for the sake of the herd of the Lord with a godly spirit; to be like Moses who confronted and broke the sting of death, to a great extent.

Love is the support that justifies man, when he offers himself to death for the sake of his opponents.

(St. Ambrose)

After setting the Sheep Gate, the high priests and the priests consecrated it; as it would be befitting of the gate through which the sacrifices offered to the Lord enter, to be consecrated, and not to be used for any other purpose.

When the heart of the believer becomes the Sheep Gate, and opens wide by the Spirit of the Lord, to have the Lamb of God, the only begotten Son, enter to dwell in it together with His Holy Father; it would be

unfitting to be used for any other purpose, as it became consecrated for the Lord.

.....About this the apostle Paul says: *"Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in You? If anyone*

defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (1 Corinthians 3: 16-17)..

"Next to Eliashi, the men of Jericho built. And next to them Zaccur the son of Imri buil" (2)

It is amazing that directly following the high priest were "the men of Jericho". Many of those who were not inhabitants of Jerusalem came to partake of the work, not for their personal benefit, but for the common good; among whom were "the men of Jericho" (2), "the Tekoites" (5), "the men of Gibeon and of Mitzpah" (7), and "the inhabitants of Zanaoh" (13)

It is befitting of the believer to work to the account of the whole congregation, and not to confine himself to his personal interests. The way the Lord Christ did not seek what is His, but what is for the salvation of the world, so it is befitting of the believer to acquire the true love, *"For love does not seek its own"* (1 Corinthians 13: 5)

+ If you are truly born by Christ; everyone born from Christ is your brother. If you love yourself more than you love your brother, this love would not be from Christ.

(The spiritual elder)

The words “next to him or to them” came often (verses 4, 5, 7-10, 12, 19). With the division of work, every family had a specific responsibility; yet everyone worked next to the other, to have close contact, support and encouragement.

“**Zaccur**”; derived from the word Zechariah, a Levite who was among those who put their seal on the covenant (10: 12).

2- THE FISH GATE:

“Also the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and bars” (3)

The Fish Gate, located to the West, was known in the days of the first temple (Zephaniah 1: 10) to be one of the main entrances into Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 33: 14); probably the way the “Ephraim Gate” led to the main way North of Jerusalem. It was called “the Fish Gate” on account of that the traders who brought fish from Tyre or from the Sea of Galilee, entered into Jerusalem through it.

St Basil the Great calls on us to follow the lead of the migratory fish that endure traveling great distances for the sake of reproducing its race; while we, humans, are slothful to strive for the sake of enjoying the eternal glories.

+ Certain species of fish migrate when it is time to reproduce, as though moving by a collective decree, and by a specific call, to head from diverse

regions toward the Black Sea; they are seen pouring like a great flood through the Bosphorus strait toward the Black Sea.Who moved them?.....Who is their king, and who are their leaders?Where were the signs put in the public squares to proclaim the time of departure? It is the divine will that controls everything; and cares for every tiny creature.Here the fish do not resist the assignment of God; while, we, humans do not keep His commandments. Do not, therefore, ever despise the fish, because they are mute and irrational. But have fear of being less rational when you disobey your Creator.

Look at the fish, that only lack the power to speak, how, keeping their race motivates them to go through such an exhaustible journey;how, although lacking perception, are motivated by a naturally deeply-created instinct to do what they have to do. As though they say to one another: 'Come on, let us go to the Black Sea, where the water is sweeter and cooler than anywhere else, to raise our young'..... And once they consummate their mission, they reverse their course back to where they came from; for the Black Sea, relatively shallow, and with few shelters, is prone in winter, to violent tempests, that turn it upside down, and make its water turbid and cold..... After enjoying it in summer, the fish desert it, and hasten to return to the warmth of the deep waters, to relax and feed, away from the violent north wind.

When I saw such an incredible scenery by my own eyes, I admired the whole wisdom of God; and contemplated in how, the irrational fish endure such great journeys, to seek their own benefit; while we, humans, live in slothfulness and laziness,What have we to say?No one should make an excuse of ignorance; for we have a natural sense that instructs us to the fitting good, and make us dislike the harmful deeds.

(St. Basil the Great)

“And next to them Meremoth the son of Urijah, the son of Koz made repairs. Next to them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs.

Next to them Zadok the son of Baana made repairs” (4)

“Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord” (5)

Tekoa; was a little town 5 miles South of Bethlehem, famed of being the home of the prophet Amos (1: 1). The Tekoites were not mentioned in the list of those who returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2: 21-35).

“Those who did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord”; were the nobles of Tekoa (5), while the common people, when they finished the lot assigned to them, moved to help the others (27). That shows that not all the inhabitants of Judah unanimously consented to the project.Even though they were of high social status, yet their refusal did not lessen the enthusiasm of Nehemiah, nor the spirit of serious work of the leaders and the common people. Nehemiah’s fiery spirit was a strong motive under all circumstances to many.

3- THE OLD GATE:

“.Moreover Jehoiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah repaired the Old Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors, with its bolts and bars” (6)

The old Gate; (Or Heshna Gate) leads to a village close to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 13: 19). It was so called, according to some, because it was the gate of the old city of Jerusalem “Salem”, built by Melchizedek.

“And next to them Melatiah the Gibeonite, Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and Mizpah, repaired the residence of the governor of the region beyond the River” (7)

According to some, ‘**Meronoth**’, or the city of Meron, close to Bibeon, was one of the cities of Benjamin.

Mizpah; a city of Benjamin, (Tellen-Nasbeh); together with Gibeon, were under the authority of the governor of the region beyond the Euphrates.

The residence of the governor of the region beyond the river; Before the coming of Nehemiah, Jerusalem was governed by a deputy of the king of Persia (15), then was judged by rulers and judges chosen from among the Jews themselves.

“Next to him Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs. Also next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, made repairs; and they fortified Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall” (8).

Now he turns to the Western section of Jerusalem. The Jews in the old used to care for the presence among them of goldsmiths, perfumers (a kind of chemists), and traders; every category of which had their own union in the days of Nehemiah. The perfumers, beside trading in the different kinds of herbs and spices, were responsible of providing the temple’s needs of those materials, in particular the incense...

Because the goldsmiths, the perfumers, and the traders, dwelt outside the walls of the city (31-32), according to some, building of the wall was against their own benefit; because it would hinder their easy access to and from the city of Jerusalem to do their business. Yet they contributed to the project, trusting that *“the blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it”* (Proverb 10: 22).; and that what they might lose because of building the wall, God will

make up for them, by what they will certainly acquire of God's pleasure, which surpass any material profit.

- + The author of this book did not care much to write about the things of this life, but most of his contemplations concerned things of heaven "*for our citizenship is in heaven*" (Philippians 3: 20); saying: "*For life is hidden with Christ in God*" (Colossians 3: 3).our strife for the rewards are there, where life does not end by death, but will be revived more and more..... It is true that those who follow this principle will have more honor than the crowned kings, on account of that they seek greater things.

(St. John Chrysostom)

The broad wall; was built by king Uzziah to confront the attacks of Joash, king of Samaria, in the eighth century B.C., and excavated in the year 1971 B.C. It so seems that the Chaldeans being unable to break it down, left it

Intact.

"And next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur, leader of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs" (9)

Rephaiah, was the ruler of half the central quarter, one of five quarters of Judah.

"Next to them Jedaiah the son of Harumaph made repairs in front of his house. And next to him Hattush the son of Hashabniah made repairs" (10)

It was a wise decision to let everyone work on building the part of the wall **in front of his house, or his dwelling** (10, 23, 28, 29, 30). For if everyone cared to clean before his own house, the whole street will be clean.; If everyone cared for

one poor person, there will be no one poor in the whole world; and if everyone cared for the salvation of one soul, no man will be lost.

“Malchijah the son of Harim and Hashub the son of Pahath-Moab repaired another section, as well as the Tower of the Ovens” (11).

Hashub; is short of Hashbaiah, one of those who put their seal on the covenant (10: 23).

The towers of ovens; mentioned only here, was located on the western wall, probably at the same location where Uzziah built the tower at the Corner Gate (2 Chronicles 26: 9). The ovens were usually built in the bakers’ market.(Jeremiah 27: 21).

“And next to him was Shallum the son of Hallohesh, leader of half the district of Jerusalem; he and his daughters made repairs” (12)

Hallohesh, an unbecoming name, refers to the (whispers), of the charmer to the cobra (Psalm 58: 5; Ecclesiastes 10: 11)

Shallum’s daughters; most probably rich heiresses or widows, who contributed to the expenses of building the wall before their houses, or to the sustenance of the workers and their families. This was a unique mention of the contribution of women in the project of building the wall. The way the apostle Paul referred to ‘Euodia and Syntyche’ who strived together with him for the gospel (Philippians 4: 3).

4- THE VALLEY GATE:

“Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate. They built it, hung its doors with its bolts and bars, and repaired a thousand cubits of the wall as far as the Refuse Gate” (13)

Zanoah: Two cities were found with the same name in Judah (Joshua 15: 34, 56). The one mentioned here was 20 miles south-west of Jerusalem

A thousand cubit; namely about 1720 feet, an unusual length; probably because most of this section was less damaged.

5- THE REFUSE GATE:

“Malchijah the son of Rechab, leader of the district of Beth Hacerem, repaired the Refuse Gate; he built it and hung its doors with its bolts and bars” (14)

Here he talks about the southern section of the wall

Rechab; the name of a father of a tribe of godly men, called the ‘Rechabites’ (Jeremiah 35).

Beth Hacerem; was referred to in Jeremiah 6: 1, as a province in which a signal fire is set.

6- THE FOUNTAIN GATE:

Here he starts to talk about the eastern section of the wall (15-32)

“Shallun the son of Col-Hozeh, leader of the district of Mizpah, repaired the Fountain Gate; he built it, covered it, hung its doors with its bolts and bars, and repaired the wall of the

Pool of Shelah by the King's Garden, as far as the stairs that go down from the City of David” (15)

The Fountain Gate: facing the fountain of 'En-Rogel'

Col-Hozeh; literally meaning (everyone is a seer), probably refers to a family that practiced divinity.,

The pool of Shelah ; or 'the pool of Siloam', or the 'the pool of the messenger'(John 9: 7), to the South.

The king's garden; out of the wall at the southern side of the hill of Zion, between Teronion and Kedron, where the Kedron valley meets the Henom valley.

"After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, leader of half the district of Beth Zur, made repairs as far as the place in front of the tombs of David, to the man-made pool, and as far

as the House of the Mighty" (16)

According to 'Calmet', the pool here is a dam (or a tank) built by Hezekiah when he was besieged in Jerusalem by Sennacherib (2 Chronicles 32: 4)

Beth Zur; a main quarter , 20 miles south of Jerusalem.

The house of the mighty; probably the dwelling place of David's mighty men of valor, that later turned to a military camp or a storehouse for weapons..

"After him the Levites, under Rehum the son of Bani, made repairs. Next to him Hashabiah, leader of half the district of Keilah, made repairs for his district" (17)

Keilah; a city south-west of Jerusalem, 8 miles north-west of Hebron, close to the border of the Philistines; carried out a prominent role at the beginning of the history of David (1 Samuel 23: 1)

"After him their brethren, under Bavai the son of Henadad, leader of the other half of the district of Keilah, made repairs" (18)

"And next to him Ezer the son of Jeshua, the leader of Mizpah, repaired another section in front of the Ascent to the Armory at the buttress" (19)

That place was probably a tower at the corner of the wall, where weapons were stored to protect the city; to which the people resort in case of danger to be armed with weapons.

“After him Baruch the son of Zabbai carefully repaired the other section, from the buttress to the door of the house of Eliashib the high priest” (20)

Baruch; means (blessed). Whoever enjoys the blessing of the Lord, will not confine himself within narrow limits, but will work with firmness and fiery zeal; and once he consummates what is assigned to him, will find pleasure in helping others. The children of God, featured by a wide heart and mature mind, would never cease working and helping one another.

“After him Meremoth the son of Urijah, the son of Koz, repaired another section, from the door of the house of Eliashib to the end of the house of Eliashib” (21)

The dwelling place of the high priest and the priests at the eastern section of the city wall, at its connection with its section beyond the Kedron valley.

“And after him the priests, the men of the plain, made repairs” (22)

The plain; Some of the workers in the temple, specially the singers, used to dwell in the countryside around Jerusalem; and it so seems that some of the priests dwelt there together with them.

“After him Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs opposite their house. After them Azariah the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ananiah, made repairs by his house” (23)

Hassshub; This name was also mentioned in verse 11. Two persons were probably called by this name; or one person, committed to work in two sections of the wall.

“After him Binnui the son of Henadad repaired another section, from the house of Azariah to the buttress, even as far as the corner” (24)

“Palal the son of Uzai made repairs opposite the buttress, and on the tower which projects from the king’s upper house that was by the court of the prison. After him Pedaiah

the son of Parosh made repairs” (25)

The king’s upper house; probably the old house of David..... The tower mentioned here was a tower to guard the royal palace.

8- THE WATER TOWER:

“Moreover the Nethinim who dwelt in Ophel made repairs as far as the place in front of the Water Gate toward the east, and on the projecting tower” (26)

In this work, not only the priests and the Levites worked, but were also joined by the common people who worked in the temple.

Ophel; at the northern side of the hill south-east of Jerusalem, that formed the original city of David, south of the region of the temple (2 Chronicles 27: 3; 33: 14).

The Water Tower; This was not a gate to the city, but a gate to the palace of the temple; so called because it led to the main source of water; namely ‘Gihon Spring’, embracing a wide region, where the law was read (8: 1, 16, 3; 12: 37)..

“After them the Tekoites repaired another section, next to the great projecting tower, and as far as the wall of Ophel” (27)

While the nobles of Tekoa refrained to stretch their hands to the work (5), the commons among them did a double work; for, after finishing their commitments, they sought more work to do.

9- THE HORSE GATE:

“Beyond the Horse Gate the priests made repairs, each in front of his own house” (28)

The Horse Gate; The gate through which the horses go to drink, close to the temple

10-THE EAST GATE:

“After them Zadok the son of Immer made repairs in front of his own house. After him Shemaiah the son of Shechaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, made repair” (29)

“After him Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun, the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another section. After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah made repairs in front of his dwelling” (30)

Hananiah was the sixth of Shelmaiah's sons. Nothing is known about his five older brothers, and there is no mention that they partook of building the wall. It is befitting of the believer to follow the lead of the serious workers, and never to become slothful with the excuse that those older than him do not work. Man's true honor is not in the number of years of his age, nor in his position in the society, but rather in his faithfulness and his holy zeal in the Lord.

11- THE NETHINIM OR THE MIPHCAD GATE:

“After him Malchijah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs as far as the house of the Nethinim and of the merchants, in front of the Miphkad Gate, and as far as the upper room at the corner” (31)

Some goldsmiths dwelt east of the wall of the region of the temple, and some others dwelt in the western regions.

“And between the upper room at the corner, as far as the Sheep Gate, the goldsmiths and the merchants made repairs” (32)

This verse brings us forth to the north-eastern corner of Jerusalem, close to the Sheep Gate (1)

It was not mentioned that Nehemiah took part in building the wall, not out of haughtiness, but because he preferred not to be confined to one place, but to continually move from one place to another to supervise the work, to encourage the workers, to mend the situation in any place, and to care for the guarding issue. Besides, we are sure that he, now and then stretched his hands to help any weak portion of the work..

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 3

YOU, O LORD, YOU WISH ALL TO BE LEADERS WHO WORK BY YOU

+ O, Amazing Leader;

You wish all to be leaders who work by You;

And that no one among them be slothful or lazy;

You wish all to work with an exalted zeal, together with a heavenly wisdom.

+ You are the Leader of the procession of work;

The priests work by You;

They build the Sheep Gate;

Hiding in You, O the Lamb of God;
No leader would not need Your salvation
To be purified by Your blood, O Holy One;
And, in his turn, to desire the purity of all hearts.

- + Under Your banner, they bear Your Spirit;
all the leaders work, not for the sake of their own benefit;
But for the edification of Your kingdom in every heart
- + Let the great, work together with the commons;
Let the literate, work together with the illiterate;
Let men, work together with women;
Let the young men, work together with the young girls;
Let all partake of the work, whatever be their capabilities and talents;
For Your Holy Spirit grants all the spirit of wise leadership;
- + All would race with the spirit of zeal and love;
Everyone would wish to support his brother.
- + What would the congregation do, except to have You transfigure in them;
For You are the true Worker;
You surround the congregation like a Wall to the spiritual Jerusalem;
You are the true Gate;

Through whom they will all enter;

In You they walk;

And in You they reach.

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CHAPTER 4

OPPOSITION OUTSIDE AND INSIDE

With every good work from God, there will be opposition from the devil. With every step by Nehemiah to work, the devil moved in some way or another to make it void.

- 1- The arrival of Nehemiah to Judah was confronted by dismay from the leaders of the surrounding nations
- 2- The decision of the congregation to rebuild was confronted by mocking and despite.
- 3- The progress of the work was confronted by the enemies with anger and ridicule.

This is the third time we see Sanballat the Samaritan, and Tobiah the Ammonite, seem to be holding an official meeting in Samaria, with the goal of attempting to stop the rebuilding of the wall; where Sanballat showed his despite of the Jews and their work.

Being fully aware of those destructive moves, Nehemiah's reaction was not to enter into any debate, but to resort by the heart and tongue to God, and to keep on working without ceasing.

The enemies start by using the language of mocking and ridicule to destroy the psyche of the Jews . But once the work started to show progress, and the enemies were to be excluded from it, they changed their tactics to violent opposition.Here we wish to confirm that that the opposition Nehemiah

confronted, is a living portrait of the opposition of the devil and his hosts against the believers all the time, and in many ways

1- Sanballat and Tobiah mock the Jews	1 - 3
2- Nehemiah cries out to God	4 - 5
3- The Jews keep on working	6
4- The hosts of evil join forces	7 - 8
5- Praying and setting watch	9
6- The enemy provoke the spirit of failure	1- - 12
7- Nehemiah exhorts of the spirit of strength	13 - 22
8- Nehemiah the laborer	23

1- SANBALLAT AND TOBIAH MOCK THE JEWS:

“But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews” (1)

It was not possible for Sanballat, the governor of Samaria to stand still looking at the progress of the building. Like all other Samaritans who had their own way of worshipping God, recognizing only the five books of Moses out of all the Holy Scripture, the revival of Jerusalem, as far as they are concerned, meant the destruction of Samaria, and a rebuke to them for having marital relations with the Assyrians, creating a race, a mixture of the Jews and the Assyrians; and for mixing between the worship of the living God and the pagan worship.

Sanballat received the news of moving to rebuild the wall by:

1- He was stirred-up with anger

2- He moved from anger to indignation to act with the spirit of hate and envy.

3- He started by mocking them with his tongue, counting the Jews as weak (2), not up to stand before him.

But when a man of God like Nehemiah sit with God, his holy feelings set forth to seek the divine council, and the work to the account of the kingdom of God. The wicked, on the other hand, react with anger, indignation and envy; and finally move with the ferocity of words and action. Sin produce sin, and brings man forth, into a series of sins, difficult to get rid of, unless he seeks the grace of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit, who "*convicts the world of sins*" (John 16: 8)/

+ As long as sin, by necessity, is there in your members, do not give it authority on you to reign; but, at least, drive it away, and do not obey its requests

Do you have an anger issue? Do not submit to it by your tongue to utter evil words, nor by your hand or feet to strike.

The irrational anger would not stir-up in you, unless sin is there in your members. Drive away its tyrant power; to deprive it of its weapons to fight against you; for then, it will learn not to stir-up in you, when it finds itself with no weapons.

So it is befitting of everyone of us to strive for perfection; that when the evil desire finds no response from the body members, its power gets less and less through its journey

(St. Augustine)

+ Anger loosens the tongues to utter evil talk without control, provokes acts of mocking, slander, and even physical violence.

(St. Basil the Great)

+ I recommend the confessors and the martyrs, who have the teachings of Jesus, to be both wise and meek, to liken both the serpents and the doves.

Doves, abiding to their meek nature; they will never feel hate against those who rob them of their young;Can you see an angry dove, desert the place where its young are robbed?With no anger nor hate, and full of meekness, it keep on dwelling together with its robbers;The disciples of Jesus acquired such features as instructed by their Lord; Their possessions are robbed, and their children are killed by persecutors, and they still hold their peace; and keep on dwelling with their killers;Be meek when you are killed; and wise when you are called to be slaughtered.

(St. (Mar) Jacob El-Serougi)

Sanballat started by mocking and criticism of what Nehemiah and those who were with him were doing; as the Jews did to Jesus during His trial. And even when He was crucified for their sake, the two robbers crucified together with Him, mocked Him; before the one on His right hand perceived the divine truth.

Every work to the account of the kingdom of God is met with mockery; The Lord Himself was described as “*out of His mind*” (Mark 3: 21). And St. John Chrysostom was mocked by the rich and the nobles.

+ Let them laugh, and let them mock! I shall never be preoccupied with that; For I did not come to my position except to be rejected and become a laughing stock;I am ready to endure everything.

Yet, whoever persist on his actions, and does not listen to my warnings, I shall prevent him from entering into the church, as though with the sound of the trumpet, even if he is a prince or an Emperor.

+ Relieve me of my mission; or else, do not commit me to become accursed.

How can I sit on this chair if I do not do what is befitting to it? It is better for me to come down of it; for there is nothing worse than a bishop who does not benefit his flock.

(St. John Chrysostom)

The fathers of the church, speaking often of the attempts of the devil against us; say that we should not assume that he has authority upon us, and would accordingly fall into despair and belittling of our soul; even though by Jesus we enjoy conquest over him.

+ The devil is called strong, not on account of that he is so by nature, but of gaining authority upon us because of our weakness.

+ In case we actually wish for change, we should seek the help of the Lord Christ. And in case you wish for reform, nothing and no one will stop you; even the devil will have no authority upon you; as long as you choose the best for yourself, and draw God to help you.But if you do not wish to do that on your own, and avoid the issue altogether, how could He protect you?There is no obligation on your part, but with your own free will, He will save you.

(St. John Chrysostom)'

+ The soul can control herself. Even though the devil may suggest things to her, yet he has no authority to force her to do anything against her will

He may provide you with the thoughts of adultery. It is up to you to receive it, or to reject it with despise.For if you are an adulterer by nature, God would not have prepared hell. And if you are righteous by nature, and not by your own free choice, He would not have prepared crowns of glory for those who are worthy of them. Although sheep are meek, yet they are not crowned for their meekness, for it is not by choice, but by nature.

(St.

Cyril of Jerusalem)

+ The thoughts provoked by the devil are only mental imagination of some evil action; which if they have the chance to reign over our minds, it would be because of the weakness of our faith.

For after receiving the commandment to rid ourselves of all confusions, and to keep our hearts with all diligence (Proverb 4: 23), to seek the kingdom of God which is inside us; if the mind happen to forsake the heart and the goal

we should seek, we instantly would open the door of our heart wide before the imaginations of the devil, and the mind would easily receive any evil council To this extent, the devil has no authority to move our thoughts, or else he would not have mercy upon us, but would provoke all kinds of evil thoughts into our minds; and would never allow for any goodness to enter them.; Yet his ability is limited to present a false council; to test which direction our heart inclines; whether to receive his council, or to receive that of God; on account of that they are contradictory.

+ Someone may say : 'hasn't Satan harmed Adam, when he corrupted his being, and made him lose paradise'?

The reason for this lies in the negligence of him who is harmed, and his lack of self-control, and of strife. For if Satan, with all his diverse strong ways, was not able to submit the righteous 'Job', how could he, therefore, by much less ways submit Adam, unless Adam himself, helps Satan to submit him.

What then? Will harm not come upon those who are slandered and robbed of their possessions and goods, denied of their inheritance, and come to strive in utter poverty?

No!but they will benefit if they are reasonable.....Have those things harmed the apostles? Haven't they strived under conditions of hunger, thirst, and nakedness? have come, accordingly, to be glorified and famous; and got for themselves bigger help from the Lord?

What harm has come upon Lazarus because of his sores, poverty, and lack of a roof over his head?Have those things not woven for him a crown of flowers of conquest?

When Joseph's brothers intended to do him harm; was he actually harmed?

Yet, God will not relieve the plotter of harm of punishment, because his victim became more glorified; but his punishment will be more confirmed because of his iniquity.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish—stones that are burned?” (2)

Sanballat's heart became kindled with the fire of envy. Looking at the stones of the wall that were burned with fire to become heaps of rubbish, he did not perceive that the fire of envy and evil has turned his own heart into dust and ashes. What came upon his heart was more horrible and serious than what came upon the stones of the old wall.. With ridicule and mocking, he attempted to destroy the psyche of those who were building the wall. Envy is more vicious than wild beasts, for the beasts are moved by hunger or fear; whereas doing the envious good, is like oppressing them.

The work of the devil is to break down the believer's will to strive, and to provoke him with the spirit of despair,; and in case he starts work, he would soon stop..

Sanballat looked at the Jews as foolish people who do not perceive their weakness, and unwisely dream that in one day they will finish building the wall, and in one day they will be able to celebrate it and offer their sacrifices; they think their God is capable of turning the dead stones into living ones.

Many are those who ridicule those who work in the vineyard of the Lord; forgetting that it is the work of the Almighty God Himself; who does more than we ask, and beyond what we think.

- + There is no sin that can separate God from men like envy; which is even worse than the love of silver; for the later will rejoice once he gains something; whereas the envious will rejoice when someone loses something, or when his labor is in vain; he counts the loss of others as his gain. What could be more evil than this?!

The adulterer will fall into sin for the sake of a temporary pleasure; while he practices the sin, then he will most probably regret it, repent, and be saved.

Whereas the envious tortures himself, even though he may probably is

unharmd by the one he envies. The sin of envy is therefore the most horrible of all sins; for the envious, being unable to forsake his sin, becomes *“like a sow, having washed, returns to wallowing in the mire”* (2 Peter 2:22), and, by his work, he likens the devil.I may tell you therefore, that even if you perform miracles, keep your virginity, fast, stretch your hands with mercy, or sleep on the ground, in an attempt to reach the virtue of the angels; but you have the sin of envy, you would be worse than all sinners.

+ The devil is envious, but he envies men, and not another devil; while you, man, envy your brother, and even those in your own family; something the devil never do.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ Being the governor of Samaria, with an army under his command, he was speaking, most probably to the governors of the surrounding regions, to stir them up to stand by for military action in due time; although he believed that those who were building the wall were weak, and with no military capabilities.

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*Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said,
“Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down
their stone wall” (3)*

With ridicule he refers to the fox, on account of that Zion became desolate and a dwelling place for the foxes, according to the words of the prophet Jeremiah, saying: “*Because of Mount Zion which is desolate, with foxes walking about on it*” (Lamentations 5: 18). According to some, he did not say ‘Jackals’, but said ‘foxes’; for jackals go out hunting in groups; whereas foxes hunt individually by night; In ridicule, therefore, Tobiah the Ammonite says that to break down their wall, it needs nothing more than a thin single fox to walk on them.

The opposition of the enemies was all around the city:: The Samaritans in the north, the Arabs in the south, the Ammonites in the east, and the Ashdodites in the west, on the Mediterranean Sea coast, The enemies felt that, as long as their request for debate was to no avail; they were ready for military action.

2- NEHMAH CRIES OUT TO GOD: „

*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” (4)*

Nehemiah did not pay the mocking back with mocking, nor criticism with criticism, He did not incline his ears to the words uttered by Sanballat, but raised his heart up to the God of heaven who called him to work. He counted what is done by the enemies, as not against the city and its wall and stones, as much as it is against the people as a whole. Nehemiah did not preoccupy the minds of the people with what the enemies say or do (see Romans 12: 17-21); but motivated them to keep on working with an unconquerable spirit. His reaction was not to flee from the battle, nor to stop the work, or even to enter into a debate with the opponents, but to resort to the Owner of the vineyard Himself. In his own name and of all

those who were working with him, he stood seeking from God to intervene, to make the efforts of the hosts of darkness, against the divine truth, to no avail.

His prayer was recited by his co-workers by their whole hearts. It became a song by everyone of them while working.

All along the eras, the devil did not cease to reproach God on the tongues of his proud and ignorant idol-worshipping followers:

“Because zeal for Your house has eaten me up; and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me” (Psalm 69: 9)

“Arise, O God, plead Your own cause; Remember how the foolish man reproaches You daily” (Psalm 74: 22)

“Listen to Me, you who know righteousness, you people in whose heart is My law; Do not fear the reproach of men, nor be afraid of their insults” (Isaiah 51: 7).

“You have heard their reproach, O Lord, all their schemes against me” (Lamentations 3: 61)

“I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the insults of the people of Ammon, with which they have reproached My people, and made arrogant threats against their borders” (Zephaniah 2: 8)

“For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written: ‘The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me’” (Romans 3: 15)

“A fool is ungracious and abusive, and the gift of a grudging giver makes the eyes dim” (Sirach 18: 18)”

“Mockery and abuse issue from the proud, but vengeance lies in wait for them like a lion” (Sirach 27: 28)

"There was very great joy among the people, and the disgrace brought by the Gentiles was removed" (1 Maccabees 4: 58)

- + How can we follow the lead of Christ?..... By doing everything we can for the sake of the common interest, and not just for our own. The apostle Paul says: *"For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written: 'The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me'"* (Romans 15: 3; Psalm 69: 9); for truly man seeks what is for his own good when he takes the good of his neighbor into consideration, What is for the good of our neighbor is for our own good; for we are one body, and members of one another.

- + The Savior says: *"For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me"* (John 6: 38). And as the Jews, in protest, condemned Him to death as a sinner, the Psalmist, putting himself in Christ's place, say: *"The reproaches of those who reproached You have fallen on me"* (Psalm 69: 9).

Nehemiah carried no spirit of hate or envy, but his prayer was with the spirit of prophecy about those who persist on opposing God Himself.

“Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders” (5).

Nehemiah did not hasten to confront those who opposed and mocked him, but sought the intervention of God; the same way the prophet Jeremiah did when his brethren came against him and accused him of treason, and said: *“You, O Lord know me; You have seen me; and You have tested my heart toward You. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and prepare them for the day of slaughter”* (Jeremiah 12: 3); *“Indeed they say to me: ‘Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come now!Let them be ashamed who persecute me, but do not let me be put to shame. Let them be dismayed. Bring on them the day of doom, and destroy them with double destruction”* (Jeremiah 17: 15, 18); *“Yet, Lord, You know all their counsel, which is against me, to slay me. Provide no atonement for their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from Your sight; but let them be overthrown before You. Deal thus with them, in the time of Your anger”* (Jeremiah 18: 23).

If the prophets, by the spirit of prophecy, talked about what will dwell upon the opponents of God; the Lord Christ came to confirm to us our commitment to show love even toward the enemies, the opponents of the divine truth; to discern between the evil and the evildoer; between the sin and the sinner; and to desire the salvation of all, saying together with the Lord: *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do”* (Luke 23: 34). That was also said by St. Stephen while he was stoned to

death, when *“he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin’”*

(Acts 7: 60)

4- THE JEWS KEEP ON WORKING:

“So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work” (6)

The people kept working, and did not enter into debate with the opponents or their followers. For when the heart concentrates on work, the soul exults in the work of God; and not preoccupied with the opponents. So, everyone did his role, and with the spirit of unity they finished *building half the wall; namely they built the whole wall, up to half its height.*

The practical response to the destructive criticism is to keep working. We can say that the secret of their success was working with one heart. For God, being pleased with the language of the heart, and listening to it, he is equally pleased and will bless the work of the heart.

5- THE HOSTS OF EVIL JOIN FORCES:

“Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry” (7)

The circle of the opponents against Nehemiah and those working with him got wider when Sanballat and Tobiah were joined by the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites. The continued progress of the work provoked the enemies to a more vicious war in which they joined forces together

⁸ and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion” (8).

That was the third level of opposition by the enemies, which moved from mockery, to threats, and now they seriously intend to go to battle to destroy Jerusalem, once and for all, not just to destroy the wall.

5-. PRAYING AND SETTING WATCH:

“Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night” (9)

Nehemiah and those with him confronted the opposition against them by praying, together with continuous watch, day and night, for the enemy was not to be trusted. Trusting in God, and leaning upon Him, does not mean to be slothful and lazy. Setting watch and preparing to confront any attack does not mean falling under fear.

There is no point of comparison between a military pact of the Samaritans, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites; on one side, and a very few remnants who came back from captivity with no military experience whatsoever. Nevertheless, Nehemiah and those with him did not forsake the work, and flee before the opponents who intended to attack them; but resorted to God by prayer to the Lord Christ calls us, saying: "*Watch and pray*" (Mark 14: 38; Matthew 26: 38, 41).

God allows for us to pass through many troubles, afflictions, persecutions, and injustice, in order to confront all that by watching and praying; and to perceive our need to hide in God, being the stronghold of our life, greater than all the hosts of darkness; as according to the prophet: "*Those who are with us are more than those who are with them*" (2 kings 6: 16).

Nehemiah did not order those who work with him to watch and pray; but called them to join him in watching and praying. In that he was a symbol of the Lord Christ, who, before He delivered Himself, asked His disciples to partake with Him as much as they could, saying to them: "*Sit here, while I go and pray over there.....Stay here and watch with Me*" (Matthew 26: 36, 38).

⁺ It is good for us to watch and be alert, to pray with zeal, lest we enter into temptation (Mark 14: 38). For unless the Lord Christ gives us grace, 'Judas' in us will betray; and Peter in us will slumber..

Let us then stay where Jesus commanded us to doLet us do as much as we can to watch with Him; *“For He who keeps you; He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep”* (Psalm 121: 3, 4)

6- THE ENEMY PROVOKES THE SPIRIT OF FAILURE IN THE BUILDERS:

"Then Judah said, 'the strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall'" (10)

The war never slows down. On the outside the hosts of evil join force against the children of God, and even against God Himself; and on the inside some fall into a state of failure and despair; which is more dangerous than the outside war. When they, with an exalted pace have built the whole wall up to half its height, the enemy started to attack them on the inside, by claiming that there is so much rubbish to move, that resulted from digging for the foundation and building the wall, beside the fact that the strength of the laborers was already failing.So have men of Judah attempted to provoke the spirit of despair in the laborers.

. *" And our adversaries said, "They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease" (11)*

The enemies plotted secretly to kill the laborers who were building the wall; but God exposed their evil plots to Nehemiah..... How? we do not know!

" So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, "From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us." (12)

Ten times", an expression that refers to the repetition of an issue several times.

Unfortunately, even the Jews who came from other regions, instead of supporting the laborers, they were breaking their spirit down by provoking the spirit of fear from the enemies..... The opposition of the enemies is temporary,

whereas our conquest by the Lord is eternal. The apostle Paul says: *“Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart”* (Galatians 6: 9); and, *“While we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal”* (2 Corinthians 4: 18).

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7- NEHEMIAH EXHORTS THE SPIRIT OF STRENGTH:

“Therefore I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows” (13)

As the enemies seemed to succeed to provoke the spirit of fear among the laborers; Nehemiah, beside lifting up the mental spirit of the laborers; and turning their fear from the enemy to the fear of God...he planned an elaborate scheme to set watch without ceasing to work. He positioned armed men to guard the lower parts of the wall, more vulnerable to the attacks by the enemy; and on the tops as well, where watchmen could spot the enemy from afar, and give the alarm of any coming danger.

. “And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses” (14)

What was Nehemiah's reaction?..... He says “I looked”, namely I explored the situation, and thought of what I should do. Then by saying, “I arose”; he means that

he did not stop at exploring the situation, but he arose to move, and to move those who worked with him, from the great and leaders to the common people. He gathered all according to their families, and turned their sight to God the Leader of the battle; so that fear would have no place in them. The apostle Paul say: *“For God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power and of love and of sound mind”* (2 Timothy 1: 7)

Life is full of events that could provoke in man the spirit of failure and fear; but if we perceive that we are in the presence of God, we shall never be disturbed. When the unarmed children of Israel who came from the wilderness, confronted the armies of the enemies in Canaan, it was said to them: *“Is not the Lord your God with you? And has He not given you rest on every side? For He has given the inhabitants of the land into my hand, and the land is subdued before the Lord and before His people”* (2 Chronicles 22: 18).

The best way to scatter the fear is to remember that God alone is awesome. *“You must not fear them, for the Lord God Himself fights for you”* (Deuteronomy 3: 22)

“Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them; for the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies to save you” (Deuteronomy 20: 3, 4).

"Be strong, and of good courage, do not fear or be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you; He will not leave you, nor forsake you"

(Deuteronomy 31: 6)

"And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work" 15)

Once they remembered the Lord and His might, everyone of them returned to his work. They were building while armed and prepared to fight; for they became sure that in the middle of the narrow road, full of risks and continuous opposition, God Himself will fight together with them.

" So it was, from that time on, that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders were

behind all the house of Judah" (16)

According to Adam Clark, such a situation was not strange for that region, for in Palestine until recently, when someone intends to sow seeds on the land, he has to be accompanied by a guard, lest someone may come and attack him to rob his seeds.

."Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon" (17)

According to some, as no one can build with one hand, while holding a weapon with the other; they believe that what came here refers to that half of the laborers were engaged in building, while the other half stood guard with their weapons; and most probably, they exchanged position every now and then. Thus, they seem as though everyone of them builds with one hand and carries the weapon with the other hand

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. "Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me" (18).

The author portrays every laborer as doing the following three duties:

- a- He builds the wall
- b- He has his sword girded at his side
- c- He stands beside the one who sounds the trumpet

These three things are integral in the life of every believer who is serious in working to the account of the kingdom of God:

a- The believer does not cease to build to the account of the kingdom of God inside himself, as well as in that of others.

b- As a good soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ, he carries the perfect weapon of God; for he fights a spiritual battle.

c- His gospel, as a trumpet, perpetually reveals to him the way to the kingdom of God, and exposes the plans of the devil.

"Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall" (19)

As the work is great and wide, and the laborers are few, the Lord Christ commands us to *pray the Lord of the harvest" to send out laborers into His harvest"* (Matthew 9: 38), and to work together with the spirit of unity and love.

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"Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us." (20)

The believer should not only rejoice in the success of his work, and in that of the others, as well, as much as in the unity of all together as one body working by the Head Jesus Christ, the Grantor of success. Every spiritual war against a believer or a congregation, is a war against the church of God, that is committed to strive together by the a Spirit of the Lord against the devil, to the account of the kingdom of God. And as we partake of the spiritual strife of the others, and support them by love, prayer, fast, metanoias, and counsel, and do not ridicule them, we shall see God transfigured to fight for us.

+ The prophet have already prophesied about this battle, with which the Lord was preoccupied, and was consummated by the apostles.

(Cyprian the martyr)

"So we labored in the work, and half of the men held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared" (21)

Work usually stops by sunset (Deuteronomy 24: 15; Matthew 20: 1-12). But to work until the stars appear reveals the people's great zeal to work. The spiritual man does not seek physical rest, nor relaxation, but strives working as long as it is still daytime.

- + *“that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand”* (Ephesians 6: 13). By *“the evil day”*, he means the present life; which he also calls: *“this present evil age”* (Galatians 1: 4); because of the evil practiced in it.. He says *“having done all”*, Namely, having resisted all the evil and unclean desires, and all what disturb us. Here he does not speak about just practicing the works, but consummating them , Namely, that after having conquest over sins, we should stand fast; for many may fall after having conquest; and an enemy, after being struck and fallen, may stand up again to resume his attack..... As long as we do not falter the enemy will fall again if we stand fast.

By saying,: *“that you may be able to withstand in the evil day”*, the apostle encourages us against the time, being short (calling it one day). To have conquest there is need to stand fast with no weakness.

(St. John Chrysostom)

. *At the same time I also said to the people, “Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day”* (22)

Even those who used to dwell outside Jerusalem, came to city by night to work as guards. Here everyone, together with his servant partook of every work; a living portrait of the fellowship between the successive generations; every

generation appreciate, and do not despise the new one; the way Joshua was in the company of his mentor and spiritual father Moses; so was Elisha and his mentor and spiritual father Elijah. The elders need the strength of the youth; and the youth need of the wisdom and the experience of the elders.

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9- NEHEMIAH THE LABORER:

“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” (23)

Going to water for washing or drinking with his weapon, refers to alertness and perpetual readiness.

- + *“Let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light”* (Romans 13: 12). Yes! For the day calls us to put the weapons on, and to fight (spiritually).Do not fear when you hear the word “weapons”; for the seen armor is heavy and troublesome to put on; whereas the weapons here, are desirable and worthy of praying to have them, for they are weapons of light, that give you more splendor than the sun, and makes you more secure.

“Let us walk properly, as in the day” (Romans 13: 13)..... He did not tell you to “Walk”, but said, *“Let us walk”*, to make his exhortation gentle and more acceptable.

“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13: 14) ,..... Here he does not talk about specific works, but refers to greater issues. For whenever he talks about iniquities he would refer to its works, but talking about virtue he

refers to its weapons, to show that virtue makes its possessor in perfect security and great splendor He presents the Lord and King Himself as a garment, that whoever puts Him on, virtue will absolutely be his.

(St. John Chrysostom)

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 4

LIBERATE ME, O LORD, FROM THE SPIRIT OF ANGER

- + Grant me the meekness of doves, that anger would find no place in me;
That I, in simplicity, and in wisdom of the spirit, would love all;
And if someone became angry with me, I would only fear you;
For the anger of men would not harm me, as long as You are pleased with me;

Liberate me and them from the spirit of anger;
For us all to become an icon of Yours;
- + Behold, the enemy mocks me;
He counts me weak, and is not able to work;
That what I build, a single fox can break down;
If it walks on it, its foundation would be shaken;

He counts my heart as a desolate place, a dwelling place only for foxes.

- + I confess to You that I am just dust and ashes;
I have nothing inside me but thorns and thistles
But Your grace can set heaven out of dust;
It drives out every enemy away, to make You dwell inside me;
Your Spirit sets out of me a holy sanctuary for Yourself;
It make me a fortified Jerusalem;
It turns my energies into an army with banners;
By You, I enjoy the resurrected life, the deposit of heaven.

- + Turn my eyes away from the opponent enemy;
That the spirit of failure would not dwell in me;
Let me look at Your works, so that my heart would be filled with zeal;
That my hands would be strengthened to work
That all my being would move to pray and to work at the same time;
Let all the hosts of evil join forces against me;
For Your pleasure in me, is greater than all the hosts of darkness;
And Your right hand is stronger than all the evil energies.

- + Let all the evil energies plot against You;
But let me work with the spirit of love and unity, together with my brethren;
For then, You would bless the work, as long as it is done by the one heart.

- + Together with every success You grant me;
The enemy attempts to lessen my trust in You;
To provoke the spirit of failure in me;
But You grant me the spirit of strength, of understanding, and of love.

- + The enemy intends to destroy me with all ways;
But you are the secret of my life and prosperity;
Let me lean on You; for You are the Stronghold of my life;
Let me work with the riches of Your grace, so as not to know any
slothfulness;

- + Grant my hands never to stop working in Your vineyard;
Let me bear the perfect weapon of God;
Let me bear the shield of righteousness, and faith;
And the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit;
Let him who blows the trumpet of the gospel stand beside me;

- + Grant me to rejoice in that You work in every believer;
That in You, all assemble together;
That by You, the building would become one and heavenly.

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CHAPTER 5

INNER TROUBLES

In the midst of that great achievement done by Nehemiah, namely building the wall of Jerusalem, realized in record time – 52 days (Nehemiah 6: 52); it so seemed that the time was not convenient for Nehemiah to call for an assembly of the nobles and rulers (7) to deal with the problem of the oppression falling upon the poor and the needy. But Nehemiah, being a great leader who works through his love for God and for his brethren; would not disregard such a calamity that has befallen upon the people.

The circumstances were extremely difficult. On one aspect the people suffered from a famine because of the scarcity of rainfall (3), beside the commitment of all to work in building the wall, when the poor had nothing to sustain their daily needs. On another aspect, because there were cruel hearts which had no mercy, the poor cried out, complaining of the heavy debts they could not repay to their rich brethren; and the bondage into which their children have fallen to fulfill those debts. That bitter calamity confronted the people at a time the outside enemies joined forces against the work for the account of the kingdom of God..

The inside troubles were more dangerous than the outside ones; even if the former were just *“little foxes that spoil the vines”*. (Songs 2: 15).

The nation assembled together – rich and poor – to work together. But the human nature most probably resisted the divine work. Despite the fact that the rich did not intend to practice the heavy pressure on the poor, as mentioned in

Isaiah 5, yet they were only preoccupied with getting what they assumed as their right; namely getting back the loans they gave to the poor, plus the high interest (usury), they put in the form of money, possessions, and even children (1-5).

Although the Holy Book is not against taking interest on loans (Deuteronomy 23: 19; Matthew 25: 27); yet it was not allowed for the Israeli to take interest from his fellow Israeli (Exodus 22: 25), if the loan is not given for investment, but out of need.But as the poor then, had to take loans because of the famine, and not because of doing business (3); And according to the law, the Jewish slaves had to be set free in the seventh year (Exodus 21: 2-6).

According to some, the events in this chapter concern a late period of Nehemiah's life,

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|---------------------------------------|---------|
| 1- The complaints of the poor | 1 - 5 |
| 2- The practical action of Nehemiah | 6 - 13 |
| 3- Nehemiah as a practical role model | 14 – 19 |

1- THE COMPLAINTS OF THE POOR:

At the time the people cared to build the broken-down wall of the city, Nehemiah discovered that the society itself was broken-down, and in need of repair:

- a- Building the wall made some farmers forsake their land to work on the wall, which caused them very difficult financial problems. For some of the rich used those circumstances to give loans with high interest (usury) that were hard to pay (2).
- b- Because of the famine, some of the poor had to put their children as pawn to purchase food for them.
- c- Some had to mortgage their lands and possessions (3)

- d- Some had to take loans to pay their due taxes or the tribute they were committed to pay (4)
- e- Some had to sell their children as slaves (5)

“And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren” (1)

The seriousness of that situation shows more by the commitment of women to join their husbands in complaining of their misery. `The complaint was not against a foreign authority, but against fellow citizens, who abused the poor at a time the city was in need for all to work for the common cause. .... The outcry of the poor was actually addressed to God Himself, seeking His intervention` for the sake of justice (See Exodus 3: 7; 22: 22-23; Psalm 9: 12; Isaiah 5: 7).

By the “*Jewish brethren*”, is meant the rich Jews who returned from captivity about one century ago (537 BC), under the leadership of Zerubbabel, with huge wealth they acquired through successful projects in Babylon; or rather their descendants. About 50, 000 captives who returned from Babylon with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem with great wealth, got preoccupied with building mansions for themselves, and forgot all about building the house of the Lord, and about their poor brethren. God sent to them the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah to exhort them to care for the house of the Lord, to have His blessing on the city.

“For there were those who said, “We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live.” (2)

Saying: *"We, our sons, and our daughters are many"*, it so seems that the descendants of the poor are more numerous than those of the rich; a phenomenon we see in many societies, and which causes great problems.

"There were also some who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine." (3)

The situation became very serious (Haggai 1: 9). The rich became richer, whereas the poor and the almost poor came to be in bitter famine. The produce on the market became scarce, and the prices became very high; that many did not find their necessary daily needs.

"There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards" (4)

Here he means the tribute they had to pay to the king of Persia, The Persians were known for their greed to collect silver and gold coins which they turn into alloys to store. In Shushan, Alexander the Great found 9000 pieces of gold (270 tons), and 40,000 pieces of silver (about 1200 tons), stored as alloys. As much as gold is taken out of exchange, prices become sky-high.

"Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters

have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards." (5)

They did not only lose their land and houses, but, because of poverty, they sold their sons and daughters as slaves, or delivered them as such, to let them find food while serving their masters; even though they are their brethren, fellow Jews.The law allowed for selling the children in case of emergency (Exodus 21: 7).

It is amazing that those rich people have forgotten that all, even the royal household, have fallen into captivity all those years, and that all have tasted the humiliation of bondage in Babylon; It was befitting of them, having previously been deprived of freedom, to commiserate with their poor brethren.

2- THE PRACTICAL ACTION OF NEHEMIAH:

“And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words” (6)

It was not possible for Nehemiah to keep his peace before such a situation, he became very angry; and after deep thinking, he, dared to rebuke the nobles and the rulers (See James 5: 1-6) for disregarding their poor brethren (Deuteronomy 15: 7-11).....Our Gospel calls us to help all men, particularly our fellow believers.

“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” (7)

The Holy Book , calls us not to exact usury from the needy (Exodus 22: 24-26; Leviticus 25: 35-38; Deuteronomy 23: 20)..... It is not wrong to give loans, or even to take reasonable interest, as long as the loan is for the sake of

investment; but the Holy Book condemns greed and abuse of the people in need. The psalmist says: *"Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness"* (Psalm 119: 36); and the prophet Isaiah says: *"Yes, they are greedy dogs, which never have enough; they all look to their own ways; everyone for his own gain"* (Isaiah 56: 11).

Lactantius, and Sts. Cyprian, Basil the Great, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory the Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and Athanasius the apostolic, often attacked taking usury. Among the traps of the devil, St. Cyril of Jerusalem refers to greed and usury; And, concentrating on usury as being done against the Lord Christ Himself in the person of the poor; St. Hilary, bishop of Poitiers (315-367 AD) says that giving loans, instead of being a virtue, turns into a curse when an exaggerated interest is sought on it. For instead of supporting the poor, the usury-taker makes him more in need..

The greatest opponent of the usury were St. Basil the Great (330 – 379) and St. Gregory of Nyssa (335 = 394); who considered usury as an assault upon the poor; and upon the Scripture commandment. Counting usury as among the sins that lead to perdition, St. Ambrose says: [He who takes usury is a robber who is not worthy to live].

- + He who seeks God, and searches for the truth, does not rob, nor covets for what belong to the others, nor gives money with usury to those going through affliction; nor humiliates someone who seeks a loan for an urgent need.

- + Why do you pretend goodness while wounding others?On what you give as a gift, the poor weep daily..... Do you think God does not see what you do, from heaven? The Holy Book says: “The Most High has no pleasure in the offerings of the wicked” Is it right for man to give gifts by which he makes the other poor? The Mighty One rejects such gifts; for your gift is taken from among tears You are deceiving yourself, and not anyone else.

(Comadianis)

- + Nothing is more unbearable than to give benefit to a poor man that makes him poorer, to give him a loan with a high interest that increases his misery.

If you are a good Christian, What reward do you expect from God; if, instead of seeking to help someone, you harm him?..... Why do you plan to seek usury on your vain money, that makes your brother, poorer, and you richer? Remember that he, from whom you seek usury, is a poor in need, for whose sake Christ became poor in need. Know that whether you do, goodness or evil, you do it to Christ.

(St. Hilary, bishop of Poitier)

- + Tell me: Do you seek riches from a poor man?If he can make you richer, he would not stand at your door. Instead of finding help from you, he finds animosity; and Instead of an elixir to heal, you give him poison to die. .

Instead of mitigating the impact of the extreme poverty on someone; you seek to drink from a barren wilderness, and increase his need;
.....You are like a physician who visits a patient, not to bring him back to health, but to corrupt the few they still have of physical strength.
..... You abuse the affliction of the miserable to gain benefit for yourself.

(St. Basil the Great)

- + Parents do not rejoice in the birth of their children, as much as the usurers rejoice, at the head of the month, in collecting the usury.
- + There would not be many poor, if there are no many usurers.
- + What will you say when you stand before the divine Judge, who takes no bribes, who says to you: 'You have the law, the prophets, and the commandments of the gospel, all of which cry out together with one voice, for the sake of love, saying: "*To your brother, you shall not charge interest*" (Deuteronomy 23: 20);".*Who does not put out his money at usury*" (Psalm 15: 5);..... "*If you lend money to any of my people, who are poor among you, you shall not be like a money-lender, you shall not charge him interest*" (Exodus 22: 25)?

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

- + He who defiles the land by charging usury and interest, gathers what he did not sow, and reap what he did not plant.

(St. Gregory the Neanzan)

- + He pays usury, who is in need for food;What could be more horrible?!

He seeks bread, and you give him a sword;

He beseeches you to set him free, and you commit him to bondage;

(St. Ambrose)

.

“And I said to them, “According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?”

Then they were silenced and found nothing to say” (8)

It did not stop at charging the poor of usury that they could not pay, but extended to what is more serious, for man to purchase his brethren slaves for himself.

Nehemiah and those with him had to redeem them, as they did with the Jews who were slaves to the Gentiles (See Leviticus 25: 39, etc.).

God allowed His people to hire one another, yet without oppression, but to give him his wages without delay; to prevent anyone from enslaving his brother for his food and clothing, without enjoying any human rights..

According to the wise Solomon: *“He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker; but he who honors him has mercy on the needy”* (Proverb 14: 31).

The silence of those accused, and finding nothing to say, bore a confession that they did wrong.

“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?” (9)

Their behavior made the gentiles blaspheme God, and put the people of God in reproach and disgrace among the peoples of the world.

Someone who lent money for usury to a friend who, for as long as five years, was unable to pay back, and barely managed to pay the interest, was so impressed by what he heard from a preacher concerning this issue, to hasten to his friend the debtor, to apologize for the affliction he caused him, to tell him that he relieves him of both his debt and any further interests; and that he will even pay him back all the interest he took from him all along the past five years.

“also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury!” (10)

According to some, this text means that even Nehemiah confesses that he himself, his household, and his servants, have all lent money with usury; but he hastened to cancel the usury, and supported his words with action, to become a role model for others to follow suit, and put an end to that shameful behavior..

..... Beside the common people, the government officials used to lend money to the needy, with high usury, and when they could not pay back, they confiscate their land, and sometime take their children slaves.

“Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil,

that you have charged them” (11)

Nehemiah demanded an instant response, saying: *“Restore now to them, even this day”*. There is no range for delay; for the divine commandment is not to be debated or postponed.

“So they said, “We will restore it, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say; Then I called the priests, and required an oath from them that they would do

according to this promise” (12)

Nehemiah called the priests and required an oath from them that they would instantly ban the usury; then consummated it by putting a curse upon whoever refrain from doing according to that priestly covenant, that he would be utterly denied of everything he possess The same way he repaired the wall using the old stones, he repaired the society of breaking the law of God.....Uttering words, and following them up with action, gave an instant fruit. Both the rich and

the priests vowed to keep the divine commandment; as though they have signed a contract with God Himself.

“Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus

may he be shaken out and emptied. And all the assembly said, “Amen!” and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise” (13).

Presenting to us an interpretation of this custom of shaking out the fold of the garment, ‘Freeman’ says that it was the custom to make a fold or a pocket in the outer robe, in which diverse things are put. Shaking it out would mean that he curses the person before him, and seeks his utter destruction. Such a custom, according to ‘Roberts’ was also followed by the people of India.

The people expressed their consent to what Nehemiah demanded from them by saying “Amen”, a word used at the end of every song of praise to God, as a consent to glorify God, to trust in Him, and to be submitted to Him; to confirm the curse on those who persist on their wickedness;to express approval of a certain vow, or of the execution of a certain commandment or covenant.

3- NEHEMIAH AS A PRACTICAL ROLE MODEL:

“Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years,

neither I nor my brothers ate the governor’s provisions” (14).

Intending to be role models in mercy over the people, Nehemiah and his men, refrained from eating the governor’s provisions, all along the twelve years of his first assignment, for which they were entitled. That is what the apostle Paul also did; saying: *“We have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. But I have used none of these things”* (1 Corinthians 9: 12-15); And he said, *“... nor did we eat anyone’s bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil, day and night, not to be a burden to any of you”* (2 Thessalonian 3: 8). After confirming his apostleship, Paul clarified his rights as an apostle, and how he waived using them by his own free will, for the sake of his love of the salvation of men. Both the two apostles: Paul and Barnabas, chose to practice their profession as tentmakers to provide for their necessities (Acts 18: 3; 20: 34).

- + If the apostle waived the rights to which he was entitled, so as not to cause an offense to anyone, and for the sake of the edification of others, which no law committed him to do;What would those who did not refrain from partaking of the sacrifices offered to the idols, a behavior that led to the perdition of many; which he was committed to forsake, if regardless of causing an offense to others, yet for being ‘the banquet of the demons’.
- + Having known that I refrain from things to which I am entitled, it would not be fair to have doubt of me as a deceiver, or doing for the sake of profit.

- + Paul revealed to us the way a priest should be, to bear the courage of a warrior, the diligence of a farmer, the care of a shepherd; and above all, to seek nothing beyond the necessities.

“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” (15)

Here, Nehemiah compares between his own behavior, together with those who work under him, all along the twelve years he was appointed as a governor, and that of the former governors who came before him, whose oppression prevailed upon the people and the nation.

By the former governors here, He does not mean Zerubbabel or Ezra; but those referred to by Ezra, like Tattenai the governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and their companions (Ezra 5: 3), but means the Samaritan governors whose main job was to collect tributes from Judah to the account of the king of Babylon; beside keeping a big portion for themselves.

Intending to reform what the corruption done by the former governors, Nehemiah accepted the governorate, but; *“Neither he, nor his brethren, ate the governor’s provisions”* (14); so as not to burden the people with their expenses, in the form of wheat, wine, and taxes; basing his rejection on the fear of God.

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

Nehemiah and his men, not only waived the benefits to which they were entitled by their jobs, but in humility, zeal, and love, they partook of the heavy work of building the wall. Nehemiah did not practice his work as a governor with bureaucracy, surrounded by an entourage and guards to give him his due awe;

but gave a new magnificent concept of authority, and leadership ; namely by partaking of the daily life and work of the people, and refraining from abusing them..

."And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us"
(17)

His heart was wide open to all; so was the mansion of the governorate.

" 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".(18)

It was the custom in the East to reckon the expenses of the king or the ruler, not by a specific sum of money, but by the possibilities presented to those whom he receive as guests on the State in his palace.

"Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (19).

Finally, Nehemiah confirms that what he has done, was not for the sake of getting honor, or to be commended by anyone, but for the sake of God Himself, who knows what he had in his heart and mind of faithfulness, love, and giving. The psalmist says: *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxieties. And see if there is any wicked thing in me; and lead me in the way everlasting"* (Psalm 139: 23, 24).

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 5

SAVE ME FROM MY INNER TROUBLES, O LORD

- + Why have they who afflict me multiplied?
Why does the enemy stir up those around me to destroy me?
Why do all gather together to corrupt my soul?
- + O my God, however great the war from outside;
The bitterness of the inner war is inexpressible.
Who will liberate me from my inner troubles but You?
However great the war from outside,
It will eventually come to an end;
But who will save me from the inside war but You?
- + Together with the psalmist, I cry out every day
*“Create in me a clean heart, O God;
and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10).*
- + I am not afraid of the cruelty of my outside enemies;
But I cry out to You because of the cruelty of my own heart;
Who can sanctify my depths, but You?
Who can pour love and compassion in my depths, but You?
- + Let my heart to soar up to You by love;
To become, if possible, wide enough to accommodate all my brethren;
To love You, and to love all mankind in You;

Plant the garden of love in me;
Water it with Your Holy Spirit;
Proclaim Your presence in my depths.



CHAPTER 6

IT IS TIME FOR WORK AND NOT FOR DEBATE

This chapter presents to us a magnificent portrait of the minister of God who never goes astray from his goal in Christ Jesus. Man's life being short, and his days few, It is not befitting of him to corrupt it by fear of failure, loss of temporal things, or the oppression by the enemies, etc. But he should always bear the spirit of strength, love, and balance.

To prevail upon fear, it is befitting of us:

- a- To study the tricks of the enemy, who does not cease to stir up in us the spirit of fear, anxiety, and feeling of failure and despair
- b- To perceive that fear actually comes from our human inner weakness. For the devil has no authority to terrorize us.
- c- To resort to God, who strengthens us to work; and grants us the power to execute.

Concerning the building of the wall of Jerusalem, the opposition was already defeated; for neither the ridicule, nor the threats, nor the inner problem could stop the work. There was nothing, therefore, before the enemy except to plot a plan to have Nehemiah killed. They invited him to a meeting with them to discuss the situation; with the evil intention to have him killed. But, being aware of their wickedness, Nehemiah rejected their invitation four times to meet them in a village 20 miles north of Jerusalem; with the excuse that he does not wish to interrupt the work within his hands (1-4). For there is time for work, and another for debate.

Attempting to use pressure on Nehemiah, Sanballat sent to him a piece of papyrus or leather to read (5), in which he wrote that Nehemiah intends to make himself a king, to rebel against the king of Persia (6), and that he bribes the prophets to proclaim what he wants them to do (7) But such a message could never shake the heart of a serious man like Nehemiah. He denied those accusations, and to put the whole thing before God Himself, who, alone can defend him.

Failing in all their attempts, to accuse Nehemiah of cowardice, they sent to him someone called Shemaiah, to claim that he could not come out of his house, and to provoke him to go and take refuge together with him in the temple, to flee from attempts to have them killed. But, again, Nehemiah perceived his deception, and declined his offer to go to the temple, for not being a priest.

Sanballat and Tobiah paid bribes to Shamaiah and probably to some prophets and prophetesses, to prophesy that the end of Nehemiah's days was close at hand (10-14).

Despite all those attempts by the devil, the building of the wall was done in a record time – 52 days (15-16). But the enemy did not cease to try other ways. Tobiah, this time, used his wife and daughter to go around among the families in Jerusalem, to corrupt Nehemiah's reputation.

1- Plots against Nehemiah

1 - 8

2- The reaction of the enemies to the completion of rebuilding of the wall

15 – 19

1- PLOTS AGAINST NEHEMIAH:

This is the fourth time the enemies plot against Nehemiah to stop building the wall, which was about ready.

“Now it happened when Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall, and that there were no breaks left in it (though at that time

I had not hung the doors in the gates)” (1)

“that Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying: ‘Come, let us meet together among the villages in the plain of Ono’, but they thought to do me harm” (2)

Perceiving that all their plots have utterly failed to make Nehemiah stop working, there was nothing more before the enemies but deception, under the pretension of entering with him into a debate. Sanballat and Geshem sought to negotiate with Nehemiah, a request that may seem to some as something harmless; and even wise. But by it, the enemy actually intended to interrupt the work.

Ono:, about 7 miles south-east of ‘Japha’, near ‘Lod’, a location out of Jerusalem, most probably in the domain of the tribe of Benjamin, close to the River Jordan. Although it was suggested as a neutral location; yet Nehemiah perceived that the invitation was a trap to take him away from his friends to be able to kidnap or to kill him.He refrained from entering into negotiations, so as not to waste his energy in things of secondary importance to his main mission; about which the apostle Paul, exhorting us to avoid the vain law disputes, says: *“Avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife”* (2 Timothy 2: 23).

- + By the disputes, Paul might also mean the debates with the heretics, with which he wishes us not to waste our time and effort, for it ends up to nothing. For, if a denier persists on his position and his view, why then do you sow on the rock, at a time you would rather direct your great work for the sake of the kingdom of God?!

(St. John Chrysostom)

“So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?”(3)

Refusing to enter with the enemy into debate, Nehemiah proclaimed that there is time for work and time for talk.Despite the importance of edifying debates between the ministers in the church, and between the ministers and the congregation, yet we should have the spirit to discern between the time for work and that for talk; for the later is easier and more attractive than the former.

How beautiful are Nehemiah's feeling that what he practices has been give to him by God Himself; therefore he says with pride: *“I am doing a great work”* (3). The greatness of the work in the church of God is that it is provided by the Lord, and to the account of the kingdom of God. That is what the apostle confirms by saying: *“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities but the same God who works all in all”* (1 Corinthians 12: 4-6)

- + Even though you may be given a lesser gift than what is given to someone else; yet, because the Giver is One; you therefore has an equal honor.
- + There are differences in the gifts, but there is no difference in the Giver; For all draw from the same Fountain.
- + One may be disappointed when he finds out that someone else has a greater gift than his; but taking into consideration that ministry involves

labor and sweat, why should you complain if someone else do more to make your burden easier?!

(St. John Chrysostom)

Nehemiah rejected to go down to Sanballat and Geshem; for he is doing a great work for the Lord; and his mind, words, and actions are in continuous ascent, and would never go down. The life of a true believer is a continuous ascent, from glory to glory, and an enjoyment of new experiences by sitting together with the Lord Christ in the heavenly places.

+ No one who seeks perfection, persists on ascending to heaven, and looks up high, can stop at one height, with the assumption that he has already consummated his work, and in no further need to ascend to a higher level. He should rather keep on ascending, until death open before him the door to reach the haven of the saints.....

.It would be better for, O lover of virtue, to think and meditate to go on forward; you are committed always to put in your consideration that there is a better life story than yours.....For if you happen to assume that you have already ascended in virtue up to where you should, your seeking would be in vain; and you will start to descend from the beauty of humility.

(St. (Mar) Jacob El-Serougi)

“But they sent me this message four times, and I answered them in the same manner” (4)

“Then Sanballat sent his servant to me as before, the fifth time, with an open letter in his hand. In it was written” (5)

It was the custom in those days to write the messages on papyrus papers, (as it was known to the Egyptians, after whom their neighbors took); on the skin of animals; or on palms of palm trees; then to roll it on, tie it by a rope or a thread, then seal it by mud or wax, to guarantee that the message-bearer cannot open it and read what is in it. But Sanballat and Geshem sent their message open without seal, to let its bearer read it, and tell what came in it to many, to cause a kind of terror among the rulers and the people, and to stir them up against Nehemiah, as one who would bring upon them a great trouble, by irrationally rebelling against the Persian king.

The enemies called for a meeting for negotiations with Nehemiah four times; but the later preferred to continue working, and not to waste any time in foolish debates.

For the first time, it is referred to the message in the Holy Book, the one sent by king David to Joab (2 Samuel 11: 14); to the one written by Jezebel in the name of her husband king Ahab (1 Kings 21: 8); to the message sent by the king of Syria to the king of Israel (2 Kings 5: 5-7) and those sent by Jahu (2 Kings 10: 1).

It was the custom in Persia and the Eastern countries, in case a message is sent to someone prominent in the society, to roll the message on in the form of a scroll, put it in a closed case, and seal it with wax or mud, to keep anyone from opening it until it reaches the recipient (Isaiah 8: 16; 29: 11; Daniel 12: 4, 9; Revelation 5: 4, 9; 10: 4; 22: 10); which implies a kind of respect to the recipient; whereas sending it open like what Sanballat did with his message to Nehemiah, implies that the latter is of a lesser status. Moreover, by sending it open, Sanballat assumed that the accusations that came in it were not something secret or hidden; for everyone in Judah and all around it, knew the seriousness of what Nehemiah did of rebellion against the king of Persia. ..

“It is reported among the nations, and Geshem says, that you and the Jews plan to rebel; therefore, according to these rumors, you are rebuilding the wall, that you may be their king” (6)

“And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you at Jerusalem, saying, “There is a king in Judah!” Now these matters will be reported to the king. So come, therefore, and let us consult together” (7)

Sanballat false-claimed that the prophet Malachi's prophecy about the anticipated coming of the Messiah (Kings 3: 1-3), was provoked by Nehemiah to proclaim himself the Messiah..

And in an attempt to stir up the local authorities, he also claimed that Nehemiah was going to implicate them before the king of Persia, because rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, only means a rebellion against him.

He started his message by claiming that Nehemiah intends to make himself a king, supported by the people around him. The possible reaction of such a serious false claim, on one aspect, is to condemn Nehemiah, and all the people of Judah with rebellion against Persia. On another aspect, this accusation is not only forwarded by Sanballat, but by all the surrounding nations, that, according to Sanballat, are aware that what Nehemiah and those around him were doing, is not to serve God, but to rebel against the king of Persia.

By claiming that he knows your evil intention, the devil intends to make you lose your inner peace, and provoke you to anger against the others.

"Then I sent to him, saying, "No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart."(8)

Without any arrogance, Nehemiah replied to that message by saying that what came in it was lies; and that he has no time to waste in responding to such vain accusations. He most probably, sent a secret message to the king of Persia to confirm his loyalty to him,

Of the prominent features of Nehemiah was his great care not to waste his time in foolish and vain debates; which he made clear in his short, yet prudent response to Sanballat..

+ I wish we behave likewise, for who can bring to us back the time we lost, when we need it. . St. Arsanius often repeats to himself:: [O Arsanius. Remember why you left the world}

(Father Dorotheos)

+ The time is not under your control.Being sojourners, nomads, and foreigners. You, therefore, have no right to seek glory, authority, or revenge, Endure everything that time brings upon you.

I imagine someone living in a great mansion, to whom some people come to kill him; and he had to pay them a ransom to redeem his life..... So you are, O believer, You have a great mansion, and a true treasure in your safe; If they come to confiscate all that, give them all what they want, but keep the main thing, namely, your "faith"

He says: "For the days are **evil**"

The worst evil of the body is **illness**

The worst evil of the soul is **sin**

The worst evil of the water is **bitterness**.

For everything its evil conforms to its nature, and corrupts it.

When I say: {I had a bad and evil day}, The good events that happen on that day are from God; whereas the evil events are from wicked people.

*“For they all were trying to make us afraid, saying,
“Their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will not be
done.” (9)*

Those accusations did not shake Nehemiah's heart, nor destroy his psyche. Knowing for sure that his intention and inner motive are the obedience of the divine commandment, he kept on working, and seeking from God protection and support, to strengthen his hands.

The way Nehemiah was accused with vain accusations, so was the prophet Jeremiah, about whom the princes of his home town said to the king: *“Please, let this man be put to death, for thus he weakens the hands of the men of war who remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them”* (Jeremiah 38: 4).

In all situations Nehemiah used to raise his heart up to God with prayers seeking His divine intervention. This book is packed with such quick and heartily prayers kindled with the fire of love.

“Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands” (9).

- + I wish we always use such magnificent prayers wherever we are, and in all situations.
- + By the heart we seek; by the heart we ask; and to the voice of the heart, the door will be opened.
- + God will not help someone unless he contributes by something; He will be helped if he prays.
- + The complete effect of faith is: God lets us ask to take; seek to find, and knock to open the door for us. Whereas he who debates, causes the door of God's mercy to be shut before his soul..

(St. Augustine)

“Afterward I came to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was (confined to his house); and he said, “Let us meet together in the house of God,

within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, at night they will come to kill you.” (10)

It so seems that Shemaiah had some way of connection to the temple; or he was most probably a priest, and a friend of Tobiah the Ammonite. By saying that to Nehemiah, he pretended to care for Nehemiah's life. Although, according to some, he did not mean the inner sanctuary, but the outer court, where it was possible to take refuge and be safe, according to the divine statutes, saying: *“He who strikes a man so that he dies, shall surely be put to death. However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered him into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee”* (Exodus 21: 13; see 1 Kings 1: 50-53; ; 2: 28: 34;; 8: 64; 2 Kings 16: 14).

The most dangerous way used by the enemy against us, is to make our own friends break our zeal to work for the sake of the kingdom of God. Although the motive of these friends would be love and compassion; yet they may not perceive that they are actually tools used by the devil himself. They often become offended when their counsel is not well received by the men of God who persist on following the divine counsel...

Shemaiah sought from Nehemiah to meet together in secret in the house of God “within” of the temple, in the darkness of the night that usually covers the attempts of murder. Not being a priest, and he had no right to enter into that section of the temple, Nehemiah declined, even though Shemaiah assumed that for the sake of the public interest, Nehemiah being a prominent leader should be

protected in that way. What a great deception! Knowing that Nehemiah was a man of prayer, and a faithful worshipper of God, he sought to enter together with him in the temple, and to close its doors behind them; as though he is calling him to encounter God, and enter into a debate with Him. But beyond all that pretense, he intended to put fear in his heart, and make him desert those who worked with him.

It is very good to resort to the house of the Lord to seek protection and counsel. But the situation here is different in the following ways::

- a- On one aspect, Nehemiah, not being a priest, had no right to enter the sanctuary, and to reside in it.
- b- On another aspect, it is not befitting of the leader to flee and hide to save his own life; for this would bring forth the spirit of fear and terror among his co-workers.
- c- Nehemiah's rejection of that counsel, was not because he does not believe that God will protect him, for he was a true man of prayer.
- d- It was befitting of the priests to support Nehemiah by praying in the temple to God to work by him. But that does not imply that Nehemiah and the people should not also pray for the sake of the work. The apostle calls us to pray for the sake of those with authority (1 Timothy 2: 2).

"And I said, "Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!" (11)

Nehemiah declined that **council**, because, on one aspect, to flee may indicate that he lacks the courage, would bring forth the spirit of fear and terror into the leaders and the people, and he would become a bad role model before them; And on another aspect, he was not one to break the law, by forcing himself on a place he has no right to be.

“Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all, but that he pronounced this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him” (12)

He perceived that Shemaiah was not sent by the Lord, because his council was contrary to the word of God, and provokes him to cowardice.

“ For this reason he was hired, that I should be afraid and act that way and sin, so that they might have cause for an evil report, that they might reproach me”.(13)

“ My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, according to their works, and the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who would have made me afraid” (14)

There are no more information in Holy Book about this prophetess, who, according to some, was one of a group in Jerusalem, whose goal was to destroy the efforts of Nehemiah. Yet the appearance of her name refers to that women carried out certain religious works in the reform period; and in the period before captivity (Exodus 15: 20; Judges 4: 4; Isaiah 8: 3; 2 kings 22: 14).

The Old testament referred to three other prophetesses: Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron,(Exodus 15: 20); Deborah (Judges 4: 4;; Huldah (2 kings 22: 14; 2 Chronicles 34: 12)

2- THE REACTION OF THE ENEMIES TO THE COMPLETION OF REBUILDING THE WALL:

“So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days” (15)

The month of Elul is almost analogous to September; and according to some, the rebuilding of the wall was finished in the twenty-seventh of October of the year 445 BC.. The prophet Daniel who was taken into captivity among the first batch in the year 605 BC, prophesied the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem (Daniel 9: 25). And behold, his prophecy was realized.

It was not expected for such a great project to be completed in that very short time; but it was God's hand that does the impossible; particularly when we work together by a collective spirit of love and cooperation.

“And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God” (16)

Although the enemies perceived that the work was done by God, and that what was achieved would never happen in such a way without a special exalted help from God; and even though they were very disheartened in their own eyes, yet, they did not cease their opposition..

“Also in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came to them” (17)

Although the work for which Nehemiah came, has been finished, yet even after its completion, there were problems; for, among the nobles of Judah who

pretended to be Nehemiah's friends, there were actually traitors, working to the account of Tobiah the Ammonite, the opponent of the good of Jerusalem.

+ In case there is one who loves me, and whom I also love, and I perceive that I am harmed because of his love, I should completely cut off my relationship with him.

(Abba Agathon)

+ In case you are friendly with someone, and was harmed by his friendship, hasten to cut yourself off him. I do not say that you should hate people; No, but I exhort you to cut all causes of iniquity.

(St. (Mar Ephraim the Syriam)

“For many in Judah were pledged to him (to Tobiah), because he was the son-in-law of Shechaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter

of Meshullam the son of Berechiah” (18)

This is an actual practical portrait of the danger of mixed marriages between believers and non-believers.

“Also they reported his good deeds before me, and reported my words to him. Tobiah sent letters to frighten me” (19)

The enemy sometimes uses those working with us, and those in high position, to give good report of the enemy, and to convince us that we misjudge them.

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 6

SANCTIFY, O LORD, EVERY SECOND OF MY LIFE

+ O Lord, Whoever gets attached to You will enjoy a fellowship in Your heaven;

You work, and will keep working for the edification of Your creation;

Grant me to work, and never to cease;

Grant me to work by, and for the sake of Your kingdom.

+ Sanctify every moment of my life;

So that the enemy would not corrupt a single second of it;

Instead of the foolish and vain debates;

My heart would raise up to talk to You.

+ Entrust me to work to the account of Your kingdom;

Let me cry out together with Nehemiah:

"I am doing a great work";

And I shall not come down;

Why should the work cease when I leave it and go down for a vain debate?

Whoever gets attached to You will perpetually ascend;
He would go up from glory to glory;
He will never go down;
Let my whole life be an unceasing ascent;
Let my thoughts, words, and behavior be a fragrance of incense before You.

+ Grant me, O Lord, the wisdom;
For the devil will never cease to plot and to deceive;
Under the pretense of praying to You, he intends to let me stop my work with You
And under the pretense of taking a refuge in Your house,
He intends to provoke me to terror and fear;
Grant me, O Lord, the spirit of wisdom and discernment.

+ I do not care much for the number of seconds of my life;
Only to know that my life is short;
But because my whole life is a gift from You;
If I live, I live for You;
And If I die, I die for You;
All the seconds of my life are Yours, O the Beloved of my soul.

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CHAPTER 7

AN ELABORATE WATCH

In the last chapter we saw how the outer work of building the walls of the city was completed in a record time of 52 days; and how the gates were set. But Nehemiah, the living leader, is not preoccupied with the buildings themselves, as much as with those who live inside them, and who use them. He felt the need for a spiritual renewal, and a revival of both the leaders and the people.

To realize such a spiritual renewal, we need to perceive the dimensions of the problem. The wall was set, but there was need for hearts attached to the Lord. No one can grant such a renewal, except God the Creator alone. Hence Nehemiah and those around him resorted to God, by the return of all the people to Him with repentance, with the help of prayer and the reading of the word of God.

This chapter talked about three things:

- 1- In spite of the completion of the wall, there was a commitment to set elaborate watch on it. Being a practical man who runs everything with exalted wisdom; it so seems from verse 1, that those responsible for guarding the temple have been also given the responsibility to guard the gates of the city; for they were not working in the fields like the rest of the people; and there was no army to guard the gates.
- 2- The lists of genealogies that came in this chapter (7: 5:-73), is almost identical to the one that came in Ezra 2. Therefore Nehemiah revised the

lists of genealogies to make sure that the inhabitants of the city were a pure race.

- 3- After few days from the completion of the wall, in the twenty-fifth of the sixth month (6: 5), the people gathered together to consecrate themselves to God. Here, Ezra appears again as an interpreter of the law (Nehemiah 8: 1); although other Levites joined him in the work (7: 7; Deuteronomy 31: 9-13)..... The seventh month included the day of Atonement on the tenth of the month, and the Feast of the Tabernacles on the fifteenth day. That month was chosen before to prepare the altar (Ezra 3: 1); but now it was chosen to read the law and to interpret it. (8: 1). The copies of the law, being only in the hands of the Levites, the people had to learn by ear. And many of the phrases were repeated several times to help the listeners to know them by heart.

The concentration was more on the warnings that came in the law, to which the people responded by weeping (8: 9). Although Nehemiah and Ezra knew that weeping was convenient to the Day of Atonement, yet the first day of the seventh month was of a special importance (Leviticus 23: 23-25); and they intended to make it a day of joy and of thanksgiving to God for the sake of the completion of rebuilding the wall (8: 10-12).

In the next day Ezra proclaimed to the leaders that they are committed to celebrate the Feast of the Tabernacles on the fourteenth day (8: 13); And when that day came, the people were well prepared by the branches of trees to celebrate the memorial of the peaceful crossing over from the wilderness, to build their own houses in the promised land (Leviticus 23: 34).

1- An elaborate and exultant watch over the wall

1 - 3

2- A census of the people and the leaders

4 - 73

1- AN ELABORATE AND EXULTANT WATCH OVER THE WALL:

“Then it was, when the wall was built and I had hung the doors, when the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed” (1)

The gatekeepers or the guards: were referred to 13 times in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and 19 times in the books of the Chronicles. They were seen as Levites (1 Chronicles 9: 26; 2 Chronicles 8: 14; 23: 4; Nehemiah 12: 25; 13: 22); and sometimes as different from them (2 Chronicles 35: 31). Sometimes they are so numerous to reach 4000 (1 Chronicles 23: 5); whose main job was to guard the gates of the temple (1 Samuel 3: 15; 1 Chronicles 9: 17-32); although they were expected to do other less important jobs (2 Chronicles 31: 4)..... The psalmist said: *“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of My God than dwell in the tents of wickedness”* (Psalm 84: 10).

To Nehemiah, building the wall and keeping the gates were not a goal by itself, but he was preoccupied with bringing Jerusalem back to worship God What did Nehemiah do to realize that goal?

The first task was to engage all the human energies to partake of that goal, like appointing gatekeepers, singers of praise, and Levites to serve the temple. The gatekeepers to guard the temple; the singers to sing praise to the Lord, to create a joyful heaven-like atmosphere, and the Levites to minister in the temple of the Lord. All had to work together: the civil work beside the spiritual one, in a joyful angelic atmosphere.

“that I gave the charge of Jerusalem to my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the leader of the citadel, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many” (2).

Hanani was the first to provide Nehemiah with the information about the desolation of Jerusalem, its wall, and gates (1: 2)

Hananiah, a faithful and a man who feared God (4: 8; 9: 15).

Nehemiah started by setting spiritual leaders who fear God, who trust in God, and whose decisions are in harmony with His holy will. To create a sound leadership, Nehemiah chose faithful men in the Lord. It is important not to choose for leadership those who fear men, or show partiality to the great and those of authority, a serious trap for the soul. The fear of God is the true source of wisdom, knowledge, courage, and daring with the Lord..... Two features are important in choosing the leaders: faithfulness, and the fear of God.

Nehemiah so did to avoid any probability of treason during his absence in Persia. If he has cared to build the stone walls, Jerusalem was in need of holy human walls; as it is said: *"I have set watchmen on Your walls, O Jerusalem. They shall never hold their peace day and night"* (Isaiah 62: 6).

"And I said to them, "Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot; and while they stand guard, let them shut and bar the doors; and appoint guards from

among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, one at his watch station and another in front of his own house" (3)

After choosing the leaders, and engaging all the human energies, Nehemiah cared to protect and guard the city; lest all what was being achieved would be destroyed.

It was previously the custom to open the gates of Jerusalem at sunrise, to let the traders enter and set their tents before the people awake, But, for fear that the enemies would take that chance to invade the city before its inhabitants were awake, resumed their activity and their ability to resist, Nehemiah ordered the gatekeepers not to open the gates until the sun is hot.

Strengthening the watch with joy, exultation, and the spirit of worship, does not imply a lack of trust in the watch and care of the Lord; for God does not want us to be slothful and negligent; but that, while doing what we are committed to do, to sing with the psalmist: *"Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain"* (Psalm 127: 1).

- + If we wish to be guarded by God, He who became humble for our sake, and was glorified to keep us; let us be likewise humble; let no one think too high of himself; for no one can have anything good, unless he has it from God, who alone is Good.

(St. Augustine)

- + Those who believe that human affairs are done by the divine care, would never refer anything achieved by men to their personal effort. For: *"Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who would build it; Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain"* (Psalm 127: 1). He does not mean that no one should build a house, or guard the city, but that it is befitting of him to believe that unless God gives success to the exerted effort, both the effort and those who strive would end up in failure.On our side, we have to start; and on God's side to grant success.We have to start building the house, and God would help us to consummate the work..... We have to guard the city, but it is God who protects it against the enemy. That was expressed by the proverb, saying: *"Keep your heart with all diligence"* (Proverb 4: 23). But even if you do manage by yourself to keep your heart with diligence, yet you should say: "You, O Lord, keep us and guard us". This line of thought is confirmed by the apostle Paul, who says: *"It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy"* (Romans 9: 16). He does not keep us from running to realize our goals; but keeps us from assuming

that we reach them by our own effort. For many of those who had such assumption ended up in failure.

(St. Dedymus the blind)

- + It is not easy for any human soul to achieve such great things. Why?
.....For there are many thieves who lie in wait; a dense darkness; and a wicked devil at the doors plotting against her.How then, would we able to keep them?Bu the Holy Spirit; for if the Spirit dwells in us, and if we do not drive the divine grace away, God will stand with us. For, *“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who would build it; and unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain” (Psalm 127: 1).* This is our stronghold; this is our tower; this is our refuge.....Now, if the spirit dwells in us, and guards us; what is our need for the commandment? It is to let us holdfast by the Spirit, and not to let Him desert us.

(St. John Chrysostom)

The wise Solomon sees the Word of God as the divine power that guards the human soul, and even guards the believer as a whole, being the building of God. Hence he asks us to attach ourselves perpetually to the

Commandment; saying, *“My son, keep your father’s command; and do not forsake the law of your mother. Bind them continually upon your heart; tie them around your neck; When you roam, they will lead you; When you*

sleep they will keep you; And when you awake, they will speak to you” (Proverb 6: 20-22).

2- A CENSUS OF THE LEADERS AND THE PEOPLE:

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

The spiritual work will never cease as long as we are still in the body, until our last breath. It is not enough to build a wall to fortify the city; but we are committed to set an alert and elaborate watch on it. For any negligence to guard what we have acquired or what we enjoy, will make us lose everything..

Jerusalem was suffering the rarity of its inhabitants. According to the list within our hands, the census at the beginning was recorded according to the families or the places of dwelling, together with a list of the religious workers; beside those whose ancestors could not be identified; and provides a list of the donations of those people.

After caring for rebuilding Jerusalem with material stones, Nehemiah now cares for rebuilding it with the living stones, namely the people of God. Ezra cared to repair the temple, being the center of worship by Israel. Now, we find a list of those who led the people of God to worship. Finally, as the Word of God is the secret of life of the people,; Nehemiah cared for the law of God (Nehemiah 8).

In Jerusalem, which has been so wide to accommodate about half a million people, those who came together with Zerubbabel were less than 50,000; and there probably were no one else, because of the destruction it suffered at the time of captivity; and because those who remained after the captivity dwelt around the city.

According to Adam Clark, the city at that time was not yet built; except for a row of houses by the wall, while the center of the city was desolate, and without inhabitants.. It so seems that, during the process of building the wall, many people dwelt in temporary primitive lodgings of wood or of loose stones not held by cement; when the city was surrounded on all sides with enemies well trained on battle, with huge possibilities, and persistence on keeping the city in ruins.How then would it be possible for a few number of inhabitants in Jerusalem to confront such a huge, ferocious, and violent opposition?!

The census as a preparation of the people for the spiritual renewal:

The goal of such long lists of names, was not to make a census of the people to know a total figure; as much as it was to show the need to recognizing the people of God , to let everyone get to know his specific role in the collective work. Some may feel bored to read the long list of genealogies in the Holy Book; but he who enters into the depth, would find in them the pleasure to know how much God cares for every single one of His people; and to exhort everyone to search for his own place in those genealogies, as a member of the people of God.

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

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

How wonderful are the words: *“Then my God put it into my heart”*; for what moves Nehemiah was God’s talk to him, in the depth of his heart and mind.

Doing the census was not just a passing fancy in Nehemiah's mind, nor the result of a temporary enthusiasm, but was a divine inspiration put into his heart. It is probable that Nehemiah used Ezra's record kept in the house of the Lord; then altered it according to what took place through the period between the coming of Ezra and his own coming, and the building of the walls. There were differences between what came in the list here, and what came in that of Ezra; as the result of that Ezra's list was made when the people assembled in Babylon before the actual return; whereas Nehemiah's list was made in Jerusalem after the rebuilding of the walls. Some people might probably changed their minds, and stayed back, and some might have died during that period of 13 years.

Who are the leaders mentioned here?

- 1- The priests (39)
- 2- The Levites (43)
- 3- The singers of praise (44)
- 4- The gatekeepers (450)
- 5- The Nethinim (Ezra 8: 30); namely those "dedicated" to help the Levites

Mentioning the genealogies in detail, confirms an important fact, that the church of God includes, beside the true believers, who have a living fellowship with God; those who work to the account of the kingdom of God, whether by preaching or by testifying through being role models.Finally, the goal of this census was to prepare all to enjoy the Word of god, the Grantor of life; according to the Lord Christ, saying: "*The words that I speak to you are Spirit and they are life*" (John 6: 63)..

A- The families (6 – 25)

The names of the families here, mostly conform to the list set by Ezra as mentioned in (Ezra 2: 1-70). We have already talked about the reason of the differences between the lists of Ezra and that of Nehemiah.

"These are the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away,

and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his city" (6)

"Those who came with Zerubbabel were Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth,^[b] Bigvai, Nehum, and Baanah. The number of the

men of the people of Israel" (7)

two" (8)

"the sons of Parosh, two thousand one hundred and seventy-

the sons of Shephatiah, three hundred and seventy-two" (9)

"the sons of Arah, six hundred and fifty-two" (10)

"the sons of Pahath-Moab, of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred and eighteen" (11)

"the sons of Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four" (12)

"the sons of Zattu, eight hundred and forty-five" (13)

"the sons of Zaccai, seven hundred and sixty" (14)

"the sons of Binnui,^[c] six hundred and forty-eight" (15)

"the sons of Bebai, six hundred and twenty-eight" (16)

"the sons of Azgad, two thousand three hundred and twenty-two" (17)

"the sons of Adonikam, six hundred and sixty-seven" (18)

"the sons of Bigvai, two thousand and sixty-seven" (19)

"the sons of Adin, six hundred and fifty-five" (20)

"the sons of Ater of Hezekiah, ninety-eight" (21)

“the sons of Hashum, three hundred and twenty-eight” (22)

“the sons of Bezai, three hundred and twenty-four” (23)

“the sons of Hariph,^[d] one hundred and twelve” (24)

“the sons of Gibeon,^[e] ninety-five” (25)

B- The farmers (26 – 38):

There is difference in number between the list here and that which came in Ezra 21: 21-35).

“the men of Bethlehem and Netophah, one hundred and eighty-eight” (26)

“the men of Anathoth, one hundred and twenty-eight” (27)

“the men of Beth Azmaveth, forty-two” (28)

“the men of Kirjath Jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty-three” (29)

“the men of Ramah and Geba, six hundred and twenty-one” (30)

“the men of Michmas, one hundred and twenty-two” (31)

“the men of Bethel and Ai, one hundred and twenty-three” (32)

“the men of the other Nebo, fifty-two” (33)

“the sons of the other Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four” (34)

“the sons of Harim, three hundred and twenty” (35)

“the sons of Jericho, three hundred and forty-five” (36)

“the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred and twenty-one” (37)

“ the sons of Senaah, three thousand nine hundred and thirty” (38)

C- The priests: (39-42):

The two lists are almost identical (Ezra 2: 36 – 69). It is obvious that the priests who returned to Jerusalem were only four divisions, not including that of Abijah, mentioned in Luke 1: 5. But those divisions were late

divided into 24 subdivisions, after the system set by king David.

“The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred and seventy-three” (39)

“ the sons of Immer, one thousand and fifty-two” (40)

“ the sons of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred and forty-seven” (41)

“ the sons of Harim, one thousand and seventeen”.(42)

D- The Levites: (43):

On his way to leave ‘Messisa’ (Mesopotamia), finding no single son of Levi in the congregation, Ezra postponed his departure, to find Levites to include (Ezra 8: 15-20).

“The Levites: the sons of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, and of the sons of Hodevah, seventy-four (43).

E- The workers in the temple (44 – 60):

It conforms to the list that came in Ezra 21: 41 – 58)

“The singers: the sons of Asaph, one hundred and forty-eight”.(44)

"The gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum: the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, one hundred and thirty-eight".(45)

"The Nethinim: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth" (46)

"the sons of Keros, the sons of Sia, the sons of Padon" (47)

"the sons of Lebana, the sons of Hagaba, the sons of Salmai" (48)

"the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar" (49)

"the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda" (50)

"the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah" (51)

"the sons of Besai, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephishesim" (52)

"the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur" (53)

"the sons of Bazlith, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha" (54)

"the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Tamah" (55)

"the sons of Neziah, and the sons of Hatipha".(56)

"The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Sophereth, the sons of Perida" (57)

"the sons of Jaala, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel" (58)

"the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth of Zebaim, and the sons of Amon" (59)

"All the Nethinim, and the sons of Solomon's servants, were three hundred and ninety-two" (60)

F- Individuals who could not identify their father's house nor their lineage ((61- 65)

Every Jew cared very much for his genealogy to prove that he is a descendant of Abraham, and belongs to the people of God. The loss of the records makes him in real danger.

"And these were the ones who came up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Cherub, Addon,^[a] and Immer, but they could not identify their father's house nor their lineage, whether they were of Israel" (61)

"the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, six hundred and forty-two" (62)

"and of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Koz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name".(63)

"These sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but it was not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood as defiled" (64)

".And the governor (the Torshata) said to them that they should not eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim". (65)

The Torshata: A Persian title of the governor of Judah. According to 'Gesenius', this word is derived from the Persian word 'Torsh', meaning (firm). A title almost analogous to the English title 'The Most dreaded

Sovereign '. The use of the **Urim** and the **Thummim** on the breast plate of the high priest was a way to know the will of God (Exodus 28: 30-31).

G- The total number (66 – 69):

Conforms to what came in the list of Ezra 2: 64 – 67. But in the list of Ezra it came that the male and the female singers were 200, while here they are 245.

“Altogether the whole assembly was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty,” (66)

“besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven; and they had two hundred and forty-five men and women singers” (67)

“Their horses were seven hundred and thirty-six, their mules two hundred and forty-five” (68)

“their camels four hundred and thirty-five, and donkeys six thousand seven hundred and twenty” (69).

As the list concerning the census came to an end; he start talking about the **donations for the sake of the work:**

“And some of the heads of the fathers’ houses gave to the work. The governor^[S] gave to the treasury one thousand gold drachmas, fifty basins, and five hundred and thirty

priestly garments” (70).

The **drachmas** was a Greek coin that weighed 3/10 of an ounce of silver (1000 drachmas weighed 19 Libra).. But here it refers to Persian drachmas.

“Some of the heads of the fathers’ houses gave to the treasury of the work twenty thousand gold drachmas, and two thousand two hundred silver minas” (71)

The two thousand two hundred **minas** weigh 2550 Libra of silver

“And that which the rest of the people gave was twenty thousand gold drachmas, two thousand silver minas, and sixty-seven priestly garments” (72).

*"So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers,
some of the people, the Nethinim, and all Israel dwelt in their cities"*
(73)

Many of those who returned from captivity, being originally from outside of Jerusalem, went back to their own cities.

The building of the wall was completed in the sixth month; and going through the records took a month of elaborate investigation, to avoid any claim of partiality. .

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 7

BE MY GUARDIAN, O LORD

- + My Lord and Savior,
You set me from nothing, and redeemed me by Your precious blood;
You renewed me by Your Holy Spirit'
Out of me You make a holy temple;
- + Who will keep this holy building but You?
Who will protect me from the arrows of the evil enemy but You?
Who will make me safe from the strikes of sin but You?
You are my Guardian; my Keeper, and the Stronghold of my life
- + Together with the gatekeepers, Nehemiah appointed singers of praise;
So that a spirit of exultation might prevail instead of that of fear;
And that standing watch would be done in a heavenly atmosphere;
Who will grant me the spirit of true joy but You?
Who will lift my heart up to heaven but Your Holy Spirit?.
- + Your commandment is the best keeper of my soul

It grants me strength and protection
It pours sweetness into my soul.

+ Nehemiah cared to make a census of Your people, together with the
leaders;

To let them all work to the account of Your kingdom;
To let them all enjoy fellowship in the spiritual work
That no one would be denied the eternal glory.

+ Nehemiah recorded a list of the donations;
What have I to donate to the account of Your kingdom?
You anticipate from me just a glass of cold water;
To find daring with You, and that my wages would not be wasted;
By Your love, when You are the Creator of heaven and earth,
I seek to hear from Your divine mouth:
*"You have been faithful over a few things;
I will make you ruler on many things"* (Matthew 25: 23).

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THE SECOND SECTION

BUILDING THE PEOPLE

- 1- Care for the law of God**
- 2- Fasting, repentance and singing praise**
- 3- Renewal of the covenant**
- 4- The new inhabitants in Jerusalem**
- 5- The lists of the priests, and the final celebration**
- 6- Consecration and purification**

Now, we start a new section of this book, when all assemble to listen to the Word of God, and to enjoy its interpretation. Here, Ezra appears on the stage, after probably been absent in Babylon during the last period, when the wall was rebuilt, on account of that he had no role in that work for some reason or another. Now he appears to proclaim his collaboration with Nehemiah within his talents and responsibilities.

The general assembly most probably began by all hearing the Word of God, after which the congregation were divided into groups, to whom some Levites who were disciples of Ezra gave interpretation of what they heard..

Although it was a day of sorrow on the sins which the people committed, yet, at the same time, it was a day of comfort by the Word of God; which opened the door of hope before all. Joy prevailed upon sorrow, as the saying was realized: *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”* (Matthew 5: 4).

On the next day, a smaller assembly was held, attended by the rulers, to understand the law, to practice it as they should..

Both Ezra and Nehemiah cared to rebuild Jerusalem; the former to repair the temple, and the later to rebuild the wall of the city. Each was a leader in his work; and an interval of time separated between them. Whereas in building of the people, we see both come together; for it needs Ezra the priest and scribe; as it also needs Nehemiah the spiritual governor, full of zeal, together with love and firmness.

Both of them were there: Ezra in chapter 8, and Nehemiah in Chapters 11-13 ; and the two names came together, saying *“in the days of Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest, the scribe”* (!2: 26).

In this section we see that the reforms, or the rebuilding of the people themselves, set upon the following principles:

- 1- The Word of God, the secret of life of the people, is the same, and will never change; brings the people back to the holy life. The divine law is the pillar of faith. The Word of God, together with its befitting spiritual interpretation, is the foundation of reform in all generations; yet not in solid literality, but by the Spirit and the Truth.

- 2- The collective prayer reveals the relationship with God, based upon God's dealings with the people in the past.For the present does not exist without the past; and there is no life in the past, unless it is practically translated in the present.
- 3- The procedure of building does not concern a specific category of people, and not another. It concerns the leaders, the people; men, women, and children.
- 4- The reform is set upon the holy worship, with its systems and rites; yet with the spirit of joy and exultation: "*For the joy of the Lord is your strength*" (8: 10).
- 5- The book of Nehemiah does not end by the completion of building the wall, but by the reform of the people. For the wall is not a goal in itself, but in that it embraces the congregation to practice their fellowship with God, and the spiritual worship
- 6- The true worship is dynamic; a continuous progress, not in the stones, but in the hearts, wide open with love to have the kingdom of God set in them.
- 7- The rebuilding is not a historical episode that passed on with time; but a perpetual unceasing work.

+ You should care to assemble more densely to give glory and thanks to God. For whenever you assemble for the Eucharist, the power of the devil deteriorates before the conformity of your faith.

+ No one should deceive himself..... If man outside the temple is denied the bread of God, he who, in pride, does not come to the assembly, will cut himself off from the fellowship.

+ Whoever is inside the altar is pure; whereas he who is outside the altar is not.

(St. Agnatius the
Theophorus)

CHAPTER 8

CARE FOR THE LAW OF GOD

THE PEOPLE DEMAND READING THE HOLY BOOK:

We did not hear that the people ever assembled together to hear the Word of God since Ezra came 13 years ago. Here, for the first fruit of building the temple appears.

Ezra the scribe did not issue an order to the people to assemble together to hear the Word of God; but when the people did assemble together by the spirit of unity as one man, in the open square, they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses. The motives that kindled the hearts of the people to hear the Word were:

- 1- Through 52 days of building the wall, they experienced that what was achieved was not by human wisdom, nor by mere human planning, but rather by the grace of the Almighty God, who promised and fulfilled His promise.

2- In the persons of Ezra and Nehemiah they saw examples of hearts kindled with the love and the fear of God, with courage, and no fear of the outer or inner opposition.

1- A collective assembly to proclaim the Holy Book 1 - 13

2- A celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacles. 14 – 18

1- A COLLECTIVE ASSEMBLY TO PROCLAIM THE HOLY BOOK:

“Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses,

which the LORD had commanded Israel” (1)

The gathering together of the people as one man conforms to what came in Ezra 3: 1, which refers to such an assembly in the first day of the seventh month, considered as the head of the civil year; known as “the Feast of the Trumpets”, in which the trumpets are blown, together with instructions to the congregation; and the people cease to work (Leviticus 23: 24; Numbers 29: 1).

+ Do you see the great power that comes with the general accord? And the great harm done by controversy?The stirred up kingdom destroys itself by itself.....Two brothers bound and united together, come to be more solid than a wall.

+ The disciples of Christ had one mind; and, like brothers, they were as strong as a royal palace surrounded by mighty walls. They supported one other, steadfast in their unity, that made them stronger and stronger.

(St. John Chrysostom)

The goal of that assembly was to repair the altar of burnt offerings, and to set the worship concerning the sacrifices. It is most probable that Ezra, after returning from captivity designated such assemblies on the beginning of the civil year; namely on the first day of the seventh month.

“The open square that was in front of the Water Gate”; the gate that leads to the Gihon Spring; probably similar, but wider than the *“open square of the house of God”* (Ezra 10: 9); a very wide street by which man crosses from the temple, the stream of Kidron;

Ezra preceded Nehemiah in going to Jerusalem by 13 years (458 BC). And although, most probably much older than him, they worked with one mind, and one goal, which was the glory of God, and the edification of His people on all aspects of their life. Ezra, being like a high priest, was the religious leader; while Nehemiah, being the governor of Judah, was the political leader; They were bound by a strong relation of love and respect.. Each had his own role, but would not do without the other; Ezra the elder was in need of Nehemiah the young man; who, in turn was in need of Ezra the elder.. .

“So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month” (2)

“Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the

ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law”.(3)

With submission, Ezra the scribe stood on the wooden podium, surrounded, on his right and left hand, by the priests mentioned by name. Reading the Word represented the divine presence; and was considered as a living and a main part of the worship shared by both the priests and the people.

Women were normally not allowed to attend the regular meetings, but in such a holy occasion, they used to come together with their children (Deuteronomy 31: 12; Joshua 8: 35; 2 Kings 23: 2; to stand for about five hours to hear the interpretation of the holy Word.

+ Reading in the divine books is not only like walking in a beautiful garden, but rather in a paradise, where there are not only fragrant flowers to smell, but delicious fruits that revive the soul.

+ In short phrases, the Holy Book plants the divine wisdom in whoever cares; and a single phrase to whomever receives it, may be a source of provision all along the whole journey of life.

“So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkihah,

and Maaseiah; and at his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam” (4)

This is the first time “the platform” is mentioned in the Holy Book, on it Ezra stood, with six priests on his right hand, and seven on his left. It was a platform big enough to accommodate Ezra and 13 persons more (7).

Shema, short of Shemaiah (Ezra 8: 13)

Anaiah, means (God answers); one of those who signed the covenant.

Mishael, means (Who is like God?); a friend of Daniel (Daniel 1: 6)

“And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up” (5)

The book was high above the people who all stood up when Ezra opened it, for all to listen as though from the mouth of the Lord Himself.

The book was a scroll, not a written document nor a printed book, which only became common at the beginning of Christianity.

According to Rabies, the congregation had to stand up when the book is opened, and when the Torah is read. Up to this very day, the congregation and the priests all stand up when the holy gospels are read during the liturgies, to give honor to the Holy Book, representing the divine presence.

“And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with

their faces to the ground” (6).

The collective reading mixed with all the people saying “Amen, Amen”, worshipping the Lord with their faces to the ground. It was as though the voice of the lord mix with that of the hearts of the believers, kindled by the divine

presence, and the faithful divine promises. With our longing for a private sitting with the Word of God in our secret place; God's pleasure is also to see us all gather together around the Word of God with the spirit of collective worship.

In the Jewish Synagogues, the blessing is given before reading every chapter of the Holy Book ; and the congregation are used to lift up their hands during worship (Ezra 9: 5; Psalm 28: 2; !34: 2; 1 Timothy 2: 8).

The repetition of the word "Amen" means confirming what is said)2 Kings 11: 14; Luke 23: 21). Known since the days of David (1 Chronicles 16: 36),. it is used by both the Jews and the Christians.

Worshipping the Lord with the faces to the ground bears the sign of thanksgiving to God, the way the servant of Abraham did when he saw that the Lord made his way successful (Genesis 24: 52); \ when the believer asks something from God, like when Moses did (Exodus 34: 8); in the collective worship (Exodus 4: 31; 12: 27; 33: 10); and when the congregation hear a divine promise (2 Chronicles 20: 18).

"Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand

the Law; and the people stood in their place" (7)

"So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading".(8)

Reading in the old world was usually done with loud voice, even when man is reading in his secret place or in a chariot, as the eunuch of authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians did (Exodus 24: 7; Deuteronomy

17: 19; 2 kings 5: 7; Acts 8: 28).

“helped them to understand the reading”, According to some scholars, the Levites translated the Hebrew words in the law to the popular Aramic tongue; while others believe that they interpreted the meaning of the law. According to Kaiser the word ‘mporas’ means to interpret the meaning, and to translate what is read from the Hebrew tongue to the Aramic; on account that those who returned from Babylon after 70 years of captivity have lost their knowledge of the Hebrew language, and talked only in Aramic.

“And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do

not mourn nor weep’. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law” (9)

That great assembly was a call to the believers to meet together around the Word of the Lord, with the spirit of joy and exultation; everyone supports the other and encourages him, in an almost heavenly fellowship of worship .

Together with repentance and the remorse on sin, both Nehemiah and Ezra lifted up the psyche of the people, to renew their spirit of joy in the Lord.The work of the church is to set up the fallen, and to fill the souls with joyful hope in the Lord. The wise Solomon says: *For everything there is a season: a time to weep and a time to laugh”* (Ecclesiastes 3: 4). Despite our sorrow on our own sins, and the fallen brethren; yet, when meeting together, the heavenly joy dwells in our hearts, and the exalted peace of God fills our minds.

Even though the Word of God rebukes our conscience on our sins; yet it is befitting of the repentant, beside his sorrow and weeping on his sins, not to collapse and to lose hope; but to rejoice in the forgiveness of his sins, and in the exalted goodness of God that calls the sinners to Him.

The only day in the whole year, which God made specially for weeping and mourning is the Day of atonement – the tenth day of the seventh month..

“Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the

joy of the LORD is your strength.” (10)

If those assembled have mourned on their sins, it is befitting of them to rejoice in the Lord, to eat from the food prepared for the feast in the fear of the Lord; and to send portions of the sacrifices to the poor and the needy, to let them partake of the joy of the feast..... The joy coming from the Lord is our strength, which; in truth, is the presence of the Lord Himself in the midst of His church, and His dwelling in the hearts of His believers, to set His kingdom in them. The Lord Himself is our strength; for He is our Portion, our Rock, and our Joy; He is everything for us, All in All.

The prophet David wrote a magnificent song, and delivered it into the hand Asaph the head singer, to put it into melody, and to sing it; in which it came:

“Sing to Him; sing psalms to Him;

Talk of all His wondrous works;

Glory in His Holy name;

Let the heart of those rejoice who seek the Lord

Seek the Lord and His strength

Seek His face evermore”

Honor and majesty are before Him. Strength and gladness are in His place” (1 Chronicles 16: 9-11, 27).

The prophet David also sings, saying: *“In Your presence is fullness of joy. At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16: 11).*

The joy that the world presents is only temporary, and does not support the soul; whereas the joy that the Lord gives, destroys the **hell** around us, and turns our life into a joyful paradise. The Lord is our strength and eternal joy.

The celebration of the feast is realized by rejoicing in the Lord, and exchanging the brotherly love, together of giving alms. God would be pleased in our joy in Him, and in our care for one another.

Sending portions, during feasts implies sending the need of the poor, to let them partake of the joy together with their able brethren;This custom is still common in some regions, like Upper Egypt; where the believers send food to the poor, and also to their mourning friends and relatives who do not prepare food for the feast. The rite of the **Forim** includes sending portions to one another (Esther 9: 19). When Mordechai issued an order to keep as a feast, the month that turned for the Jews from sorrow to joy, and from mourning to rejoice; to make them days for drinking wine, joy, sending portions one to another, and giving alms to the poor (Esther 9: 22).

Here, he discerns between sending portions to friends and relatives, and sending them to the poor; but both of them bear the sign of mutual love.To this the book of Revelation refers by saying that the wicked will exchange gifts or portions when the two witnesses are dead; as a sign of their joy, gloating and exultation, for getting rid of those who tormented the dwellers on earth (revelation 11: 10).

Commenting on the word **“gospel”**, as being (joyful news), St. John Chrysostom says::

[Yes, because it implies waiving of punishment, forgiveness of sins, justification, sanctification, and redemption “1 Corinthians 1: 30), adoption, inheritance of heavens, and an entrance into a relationship with the Son of God, who came to proclaim that to all: to the enemies, the crucifiers, and those sitting in the darkness.

What could be more joyful?1.....God became on the earth, and man became in heaven;.....all mix together, the angels mix with humans; and men became in company with the heavenly hosts.....Behold, man sees how the long wars have come to an end; and how the reconciliation between God and our nature is realized. The devil became a reproach; the demons fled; death is dead; the paradise is opened; curse is taken away; and sin is no more on the way.....Danger is gone, truth is back; the seed of godliness is sown and flourished; the heavenly system is set on earth; and the heavenly hosts entered with us into secure dealings; the angels came often to earth; and hope in the things to come poured profusely]

Eating what they savor in the fear of the Lord, and letting the needy partake of the celebration of the feast. The secret of their strength is not in food or drink, as much as it is in their joy in the Lord, and their obedience of His will with the gladness of heart. .

“So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved” (11)

Up to this very day the Jews celebrate the day next to the Feast of the Sukkoth, called ‘the rejoice in the Torah’ (Simhat Torah), when they make a circle-form procession inside the Synagogue, go around seven times with different persons, each holding a scroll of the Torah; and the children carry banners on which is written words that glorify God.

“And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them” (12)

The goal was fulfilled. They listened to the Word of God, understood it, and reacted to it.

+ Do not victimize yourself to the tyrant of grief,..... Control yourself, for the tempest is not stronger than your will.

+ Don't ever be depressed. There is only one thing fearful – the sin.

The true joy is that of the life to come, when the soul is not tortured, and when covetousness is torn apart. The happiness of the Christian is a true happiness, and not a feverish pleasure; It provides the soul with liberty, an attractive liberty, rich in real pleasures.

+ *“Finally my brethren, rejoice in the Lord”* (Philippians 3: 1). He truly say, *“Rejoice in the Lord”*, and not according to the world, which is not a true joy..... He says that troubles, according to Christ, bring forth joy.

But why does he say:: “so that I would become less sad”. St. John Chrysostom answers: [He did not say: ‘that I would not become sad’, but “less sad”. Showing that his soul was not completely free from sadness; for he says: *“Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?”* (2 Corinthians 11: 29). How could such a man ever be free of sadness?

- + He says: It is not a sin to suffer, but I would rather rejoice to go to Christ. Will you not rejoice with me?*"Rejoice with me"*.....I wish we, as well, rejoice to see a righteous man dies; and rejoice more to see the hopelessly wicked die. For the former will go to get the reward on his good works; and the later will at least cease to commit his violent sins.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Now on the second day the heads of the fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law" (13).

The long captivity in Babylon, the desolation of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple, had drastic effect, not only on the common people, but even on the heads of the fathers' houses, the priests, and the Levites; all came to be in need of someone to interpret the law to understand its words.

2- A CELEBRATION OF THE FEAST OF THE TABERNACLES:

"And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month" (14)

The Feast of the Tabernacles (of the seventh month), is one of the three great feasts, beside the Passover, and the Pentecost (or the Feast of the weeks). It is joyful agricultural feast on the occasion of the harvest (Exodus 23: 26; Deuteronomy 16: 13; Ezra 3: 4).

The leaders forgot all about the great feasts like the Feast of the tabernacles. And the Levites had to search the law to know how to celebrate it with joy and exultation.

'David Hocking' in his work published in the year 1991 AD, with the title "Reviving The Stones", interpreting this chapter of the Book of Nehemiah, says that for a duration of 8 years he lived next door to a Jewish Orthodox family with 9 children. He used to find pleasure to look over the wall at what this family used to do during that feast, how they used to desert their house for a week, and live instead in a booth they make and set in their backyard; how they used to dance, and joyfully jump around, singing "Come, O Messiah, come"; and how even the little children used to cry out with exultation: "Come, O Messiah, come. Come, O Messiah, come".

The tabernacles refer to the journey of the people in the wilderness; and represent the anticipation of the fulfillment of the divine promise concerning the coming of the Messiah the Savior, to set His kingdom , which the Jews assumed to be an earthly kingdom, that would cover the whole earth. The feast of the Tabernacles, to the Jews, was a season of joy, in which they eat and drink wine.

In the Feast of the Tabernacles, the Jews remember their humiliation under bondage to Pharaoh; and the strong hand of God that liberated them, and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They also remember the forty years they lived in the wilderness, where they had no place to settle down; and to offer a thanksgiving sacrifice to God for what He gave them. In this feast they remember

that they are sojourners in this world, seek to settle down in the heavenly Canaan, in the divine bosom.

“and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches,

palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.” (15)

This feast, sometimes called “The Feast”, or “The Feast of the Lord”, is celebrated by making booths covered by tree branches, adorned by fruits and vegetables. The Jews use the palm, the willows and myrtle branches to wave in all directions.

“ Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in

the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim” (16)

The roofs of houses in the Middle East, most probably made flat, to sleep on, when the temperature is too high to sleep down in the house, are used also by the Jews to set booths on them, where they dwell for the duration of one week during the feast of the Tabernacles..

“So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the

children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness” (17)

According to some, this text does not mean that this feast was not celebrated since the days of Joshua the son of Nun; but means that it was not celebrated so elaborately and in such a joyful way. The Feast of the Tabernacles was actually so celebrated after the dedication of the temple of Solomon (1 Kings 8: 65; 2 Chronicles 7: 9); and after the return from captivity (Ezra 3: 4).

Keeping the Word of God, and celebrating the feasts, bring forth very great gladness in the Lord, the secret of which is the feeling of the congregation of being attached to the Lord, through their obedience of the divine commandment.

“Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly,

according to the prescribed manner” (18).

Reading the Word of God day by day, brings to the soul an inner joy, and a strength of a daily renewal of the mind. A study of the Word of God is a practical and a joyful encounter with God, the Source of joy and gladness.

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 8

WHO WILL BUILD THE WALLS OF MY SOUL, BUT YOU, O LORD?

+ Grant me, O Lord, to assemble with my brethren around Your gospel;
To enjoy Your divine presence work in all;
Your Word is Spirit and life;
Your Word leads us in the journey of this life;
It divides before us the Red Sea;
It turns the waters into a wall on our right hand and on the left;
Your Word does the impossible;
It turns the serious issues into a wall that protect us.

+ Your Word shakes our hearts by repentance;
Together with the tears of remorse, fountains of joy in You will come out
with force;
Your Word turns our life into an unceasing feast;
Your Word brings to us Your heavenly joy;
We are strengthened by Your joy. O Holy One.

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CHAPTER 9

FASTING, REPENTANCE, AND SINGING PRAISE TO GOD

The ninth chapter in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel, concerns a collective confession of sins, on the level of the whole nation, together with supplications to seek the grace of God.

It is befitting of the people of God, as well as of every member of the church of the Lord Christ, to go back in history to remember the dealings of God with His believers (Deuteronomy 26: 5-9; Joshua 24: 1-3); the blessings of the Lord and His promises (6-15; Psalm 105); and, unfortunately, our stubbornness and our sins (16; Psalm 106).

Through remembering the dealings of God along the history, the people were convinced of the necessity of repentance and confession; and perceived that they are people with a holy goal, consecrated to the account of the kingdom of God (2). Again they read the law (3), that reveals God's gifts and promises. They confessed their sins, worshipped God, and praised Him (3-5).

Led by Ezra to the perfect prayer, he concentrated their minds on God the Creator (6), He who set a covenant with Abraham and his descendants (7-8).....The Exodus has been a preparation for the people to receive the law in Sinai But the people rejected the divine ordinances, and even attempted to return to Egypt (13-14) (16-17; Numbers 13: 14). Nevertheless, God forgave them their rebellion and their idol worship (18-19); and kept on teaching them by

His Spirit in Moses and others (20; Numbers 11: 16-17; Isaiah 63: 10-11).
Ultimately, He brought them forth to the promised land with all its goods (21-25).

The prayer also revealed the forgiveness of God, which would not be realized except as a response to a cry-out to enjoy the divine mercies; a cry-out that bears a true intention to repentance, namely to return to God; which was shown by Ezra and his people in this concern. What binds the generations together, however, is the covenant (32), presented by God Himself. For once the covenant is set, the perpetual relationship between God and the people is realized. Yet, man is committed to abide to this covenant, and to renew it from time to time; not only on the individual level, but also on that of the whole congregation. That is the perpetual work of the church; to renew the covenant, written by God the Father, by the blood of His only begotten Son on the cross. As God remains faithful; the church is committed to exhort her children to be faithful, as well, in fulfilling the covenant.

After a short interval after the Feast, came the great day of humiliation. Here the people, led by the Levites, separated themselves completely from anything contrary to the covenant; and delivered themselves to confess humbly before God.

This chapter presents a magnificent prayer they raised, specially prepared for them. and was used by all.

1- A repentance and a return to God	1 - 3
2- A call to praise God	4 - 5
3- A collective praise of God	6
4- A divine promise to Abraham	7 - 8
5- The Exodus of the children of Israel	9 - 10
6- Crossing over the Red Sea	11
7- The divine care in the wilderness	12

8- God gives them the law	13 - 14
9- God cares for the people's needs	14
10-The people's rebellion	15 - 18
11-God's multitudes of mercies	19 - 21
12- In the promised land	22 - 31
13-A confession of sins	32 - 37
14-The renewal of the covenant	38

1- A REPENTANCE AND A RETURN TO GOD:

“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads” (1)

According to some, this text refers to “a day of repentance”. The “Feast of the Trumpets” was on the first day of this month; “the Feast of the Tabernacles” starts on the fourteenth day, continues for seven days, and ends on the twenty second day. On the twenty-third day, men separated themselves from their foreign wives, and their children from them. And on the twenty-fourth day, they consecrated a day for fasting and confession of sins, together with reading the law; and ended it by the renewal of the covenant.

The month of ‘**Chislev**’, is considered as a month of fasting (Zechariah 7: 5)

The sackcloth, made of the hide of goats, covers the bare parts of the loins, during the time of sorrow and remorse.

Putting dust on the heads is a sign of sorrow; referred to in Joshua 7: 6; Lamentations 2: 10; Ezra 27; 30; 2 Samuel 13: 19; Job 2: 12.

Some fast from eating meat, and other food items, and from drinking wine.

Some fast by setting a watch for their mouth, not to utter any evil word;

Some fast from anger, and evil desires;

Some fast by liberating themselves from the bondage of possessions.

Some fast from sleeping, by watching the night in prayer

Some fast by repenting, to please God by their remorse

Some gather all that together as one fast.

Whoever vows to fast from all that, then started gradually to absolve for himself one after another, his fast will not be counted, and his sin will be great.

+ Without the purity of heart, fast will not be well received; It is better for man to cleanse his heart, keep his tongue and his hands away from evil It is not befitting of man to mix the honey with myrrh; If Fasting from bread and water, man should not mix his fast with blasphemy and curses; Your mouth is the door of your house, the temple of God; It is not befitting to bring trash and mire out of the door through which the King enters.

He who fasts from evil, and takes communion in the body and blood of Christ, Let him be aware that, it is the Son of the King who entered his mouth; So it is unbecoming for unclean words to come out of it.

(St. Aphrahat)

“Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers” (2)

It is amazing how, listening to the Holy Book and understanding it, have motivated them to have a life of joy with the Lord; and how having enjoyed the joyful fellowship with the Lord, they could not any more endure sin; they put on sackcloth, fasted, and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

They cut off every fellowship with the evil world, after their marriage to pagan wives destroyed their relationship with God. Their joy in the Lord that satisfied them, made them reject evil and uncleanness, and likening the people of this world.

The Jews confessed their sins on the individual level before the priest, as well as on the collective level, and offered sacrifices on them. For as long as three hours the people stood up listening to the Holy Books and their interpretation; and three more hours in worshipping the Lord (3)

In Ezra 9 we saw the leaders approach Ezra to say: *“The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the land; so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples those lands. Indeed the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass”* . When Ezra heard this thing, he tore his garment and his robe, and plucked out some of the hair of his head and beard, and sat down astonished, for the leaders have fallen in this sin, and the people followed suit.

Marrying pagan wives was considered a marital treason against the Lord Himself; for the people represented the bride committed to unite with Him through the holy life.

While Ezra plucked out some of the hair of his own head and beard, Nehemiah, on the other hand, *“contented with (those who have done this), cursed them, struck some of them, and pulled out some of their hair”* (Nehemiah 13: 25).

The reform of this situation started in Ezra 10: 3, when they made a covenant with their God to put away all those wives and those who have been born to them. But it so seems that this talk is about some other men who married pagan wives and were not previously known, or those who, after they separated from their foreign wives in the days of Ezra have received them again.

Now, those present, confessed that their fathers have fallen in this sin before them, for which they suffered chastisement; They, however, did not learn from the lesson of their fathers, but sinned before God as their fathers did.

- + In his psalm, David says: *“I acknowledged my sin to You; and my iniquity I have not hidden;and You forgave the iniquity of my sin”* (Psalm 32: 5). Behold, you see that whoever proclaims his sin is qualified to be forgiven. For Satan, then, cannot accuse us, if we accuse ourselves; which benefits us in our salvation. But if we delay, Satan will accuse us, and we shall be delivered to chastisement.

(The scholar Origen)

- + The righteous acknowledges his weakness, and the wise knows it; whereas the foolish does not. Indeed the wise moves to repent his sins, whereas the foolish finds pleasure in them. The righteous accuses himself; whereas the wicked gives excuses The righteous hastens to

come forward to confess his sins, before anyone accuses him of them; whereas the wicked intends to cover them up. From the beginning, the former hastens to proclaim his evil deed, whereas the later intends, by his much talk, to accuse the others to cover up his own evil deeds

(St. Ambrose)

- + On one aspect, do not commend yourself, and do not push others do that. Don't listen to the unbefitting talk. Do your best to hide your own exalted talents.And on another aspect, if you fall into a sin, hasten to accuse yourself; and do not wait until others accuse you; You would then be like someone who starts his defense before the judge by accusing himself; or like the righteous 'Job' who did that before all the people of the city (Job 31: 34).

(St. Basil the Great)

- + When you commit a sin, do not wait until someone accuses you, but even before standing before the judge, it is befitting of you to condemn what you did. For then, it would only concern reforming the harm you have done and confessed..... Peter has committed a great sin by denying his Lord; but before anyone would accuse him, he hastened to confess his sin , and bitterly wept (Matthew 26: 69-75; Mark 14: 66-72). By that he cleansed the sin of his denial.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- + Blessed is he who acknowledges his sin; as Paul did, saying: *"I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle; because I persecuted the church of God"* (1 Corinthians 15L 9). If the apostle Paul presents such a confession, how much more is it befitting of me, a sinner?

(St. Jerome)

"And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God" (3).

They dedicated the whole day to return to God; they stopped their daily work, and spent one fourth of the day to listen to the Word of God; and the other fourth to praise and to worship God. None of them complained being bored because of the long day. Confession of the sin by a contrite heart, together with continuing to read the law, and to listen to it, stirred up in them the spirit of thanksgiving to God. It is as though the tears of sorrow on their sins, mixed with those of joy for the mercies of God, the Forgiver of sins..... Whenever man confesses his sin and offers a true repentance with a contrite heart; his soul would exult by the forgiveness of his sins.

- + It is of great benefit to read in the Holy Book; It makes the soul prudent; directs the Spirit toward heaven; moves man to give thanks to God; destroys the evil desire for the earthly things; and exhorts our minds to contemplate deeply in the other world.
- + It is not possible for whoever enjoyed the activity of the Word of God, to remain in his present lowly condition; but he would rather seek to have two

wings by which to soar up high, to discover the unlimited light of the good things.

- + It is written: "*In the multitude of words, sin is not lacking*" (Proverb 10: 19). I wish my talk would be only to preach Your Word, and to praise You; For then, I would not only avoid sin, however much is my talk, but I shall earn a good reward.

2- A CALL TO PRAISE GOD:.

“ Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God: (4)

The stairs probably refer to those leading up to the platform mentioned in 8: 4.

They cried out with a loud voice; for feeling the heavy burden of their sins,

The Levites called the people to give thanks to God; and all stood in the presence of the Lord, seeking with their whole hearts to dedicate their life to Him. In this praise it is noticed:

a- They perceived the glorious name of the everlasting God, exalted above all blessing and praise (9: 5).

- b- God is the only Creator, who cares for all the heavenly and the earthly creation (9: 6); *"in whom all things consist"* (Colossians 1: 17); *"Who upholds all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high"* (Hebrew 1: 3); For our sake He created the world, and for our sake He cares for it. It is therefore befitting of us to consecrate ourselves to Him who created and cares for us. On another aspect, if our God is the Almighty, and the Keeper of the world, He would be capable of solving all our problems; and nothing would be impossible for Him.
- c- God chose Abram (7); intended to give the inheritance to his descendants; and fulfilled His promise (8). He seeks from everyone to enter with Him into the new covenant through the cross.
- d- Caring for His enslaved people (9), He led them by Himself, shadowing upon them as a cloud by day, and lighting the way before them by a pillar of light by night. He feels our sufferings, and intends to liberate us, and to take us away from the servitude of the devil, and to bring us forth into His heavenly inheritance; accompanying us in the wilderness of this world.

In the wilderness, all along forty years, they were in need on nothing (21); their feet were not swollen by long walking; and, according to the apostle: *"My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4: 19).

"And the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, "Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever!;

Blessed be Your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise" (5)

The repetition of the words “The Levites”, made some believe that, following a collective assembly of the whole people, the congregation were divided into eight groups, each under the leadership of a Levite. When the law was read by Ezra all were together; and with giving praise, the congregation were divided into groups.

If fasting is bound to repentance and the confession of sins, it should also be bound to praising God, the Forgiver of sins, and glorifying Him on His compassionate dealings with us and with our fathers.

When they cried out with a loud voice, they probably have fallen down to the ground with a contrite heart; hence the Levites told them to stand up and bless the Lord with the spirit of joy and exultation.

In this praise they remembered God’s dealings with them, the flood of His grace upon them, and upon their fathers, through the creation, in crossing over the Red Sea; in the wilderness, and Sinai; in invading Canaan; in the era of the judges, through the prophets; and ultimately in the present time.

According to some, the Levites told the people to stand up to praise the Lord with a kindled spirit, and a fiery heart; for singing praise while sitting, bears a kind of disrespect, if there is no medical cause to sit down.

+ It is befitting for the heart of the Christian and his mouth, not to cease praising God; He should praise Him not only in the time of joy, and grumble against Him in that of affliction.

(St. Augustine)

3- A COLLECTIVE PRAISE TO GOD:

*“You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, the
heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on
it, the seas and all that is in them, And You*

preserve them all. the host of heaven worships You” (6)

“The hosts of heaven”, refers to the angels (1 king 22: 19; Psalm 103: 20-21; 148: 2). They should start by glorifying God who, alone, dwells among His people; the Creator of heavens with all their hosts; and the earth with everything on it. The heavenly and the earthly creation would thus join together to sing praise to God; all forming together a musical choir, presenting a symphony with joy and gladness.

According to some, there is a third heaven, as it came in 1 Corinthians 12: 2.), that the Old Testament refers to three heavens: the first where the birds fly; the second, where the stars are; and the third, where the throne of God is found, which is also called *“the heaven of heavens”*.

+ O High One, the unsearchable, who sits on the chariot, Give me, I pray,
Your Word to preach to the whole earth, that You are omnipresent.

O, Hidden One, higher than the high creatures bearing Your throne; I wish
You choose me to sing Your praise among the earthly creatures, faithful to You;

O Eternal One, who alone knows Himself; How could my tongue not serve
You, by praising Your goodness?

O Fearful One, whom the sun could not behold him; Let the mind meditate
in You, and utter praise for the greatness of Your glory;

O, who is carried by the cherubim, about whom the earthly creatures cannot speak; Speak in me, for the sake of Your mercies;

O Mighty One above all the heavenly ranks; move my voice to utter a sweet glorification;

As my mouth is unable to glorify You, Create for me a new mouth that can;

Let me have the chosen lip You promised to grant Your prophets, to utter about Your divinity, with love and wisdom;

The world is so small; Where can man go to seek You?

Yet You are close to him who seeks to get attached to You.

(St. (Mar) Jacob El-Serougi)

4- A DIVINE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM:

“You are the LORD God, who chose Abram, and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and gave him the name Abraham” (7)

God changed the name ‘Abram’, namely (God is glorified) to ‘Abraham’, namely (Father of a multitude) (Genesis 17: 4-5).

In praising God we count His dealings with all humanity, as though with the present church, and even with everyone of its members.. He started here by Abraham whom they cherish as the spiritual father of all believers, whom God

changed his name from being 'just a father', to being 'the father of all', namely, his heart is so wide to accommodate the multitude. That is how every believer beseeches God to grant him what He did to Abraham, a kind of love to embrace all mankind if possible. By this the believer is qualified to enjoy the blessings of the new covenant in the worthiness of the blood of Christ.

- + It was not possible for Abram when he still bore the old name of his physical birth to receive the covenant of God and the sign of the circumcision. But once he has forsaken his land and his kinsmen, he responded to a more holy relationship, he received at the time. First God said to him: "*No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham*" (Genesis 17: 5). Then he instantly received the covenant with God, and the circumcision as a sign of faith; something that he could not receive while still being in his father's house, and while his name was still 'Abram'.

(The scholar Origen)

- + God changed Abram's name, adding to it only one letter, to become 'Abraham'; namely from being just a 'father', to become an exalted "father of a multitude", a chosen father..

(St. Ambrose)

“You found his heart faithful before You, and made a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, And

the Girgashites— to give it to his descendants. You have performed Your words, for You are righteous” (8)

“Faithful”, was rarely used with individuals, like Moses (Numbers 12: 7)

Abraham was faithful in believing that God will grant him a son (Genesis 19: 6); and in his serious intention to offer his son a sacrifice to God (Genesis 22).

“For you are Righteous”, here refers to the holiness of God and His faithfulness, in spite of our unworthiness (Isaiah 6: 1-5; Luke 5: 80).

God, faithful in His promises; wishes to pour the spirit of faithfulness in His believers, so that the believer would hear the divine voice bless him, saying: *Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord”* (Matthew 25: 23)

5- THE EXODUS OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL:

“You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heard their cry by the Red Sea” (9)

God allowed for their fathers to be humiliated by bondage in the land of Egypt, to let them cry out to God, who, alone could hear the moans of the heart, and its hidden cries; and grant them an amazing salvation.

It was said: *"The Lord said: 'I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land'"*
(Exodus 3: 7-8)

A great difference between the cries of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cries of the children of Israel. About the former it was written: *"Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave"*
(Genesis 18: 20)

+ The cry of the children of Israel here is not like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose evil was without shame or fear.

(St. Augustine)

. *You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants, and against all the people of his land. for You knew that they acted proudly against them.*

so You made a name for Yourself, as it is this day" (10)

The signs and wonders here concern the events of the exodus; in particular the ten plagues (Exodus 7: 3; Deuteronomy 4: 34; 6: 22; 7: 19)..... If God allowed for them to be humiliated by Pharaoh; He could have saved them from it in an instant; but He allowed for the ten plagues for the sake of Pharaoh and his servants, in the hope that they might come to perceive their faults and repent. God showed such a longsuffering on the wicked, that Pharaoh himself was committed to confess that God is Righteous, and that he and his men have done wrong to Him..... In an amazing wisdom, in longsuffering, with love for mankind, God dealt with them.

If God has shown such longsuffering on the tyrant Pharaoh, how much more would He show toward His people, to make them return to Him with repentance?

- + We used to sing in the praise, saying: [God is faithful and just]. We therefore, should believe that Pharaoh became cruel for the sake of God's longsuffering, and not because of his own power. This fact we clearly know from what he said when he was punished; when justice committed him to proclaim: "*The Lord is righteous, and my people and I are wicked*" (Exodus 9: 27)..... How could a Christian complain that God is oppressive; if the wicked king say that He is righteous?

(Father Caesarius, bishop of Arl)

6- CROSSING OVER THE RED SEA:

"And You divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their persecutors you threw into the deep, as a stone into the mighty waters" (11)

God turned the sea which represented a hurdle before their escape from Pharaoh, into a tool for their salvation; having divided it , made it a wall on their right and left sides, blocked its waves and violent currents; whereas their pursuers perished in the same sea. God moves nature to the account of His believers; sometimes contrary to its own laws.

The psalmist says: "*He divided the sea and caused them to pass through; and He made the waters stand up like a heap*" (Psalm 7*; 13). And the apostle says: "*Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were*

under the cloud; all passed through the sea” (1 Corinthians 10: 1); and, “By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned” (Hebrew 11: 29). And the prophet Isaiah says: “Thus says the Lord who makes a way in the sea, and a path through the mighty waters; who brings forth the chariot and horse, the army and the power (They shall lie down together, they shall not rise. They are extinguished, they are quenched like a wick)” (Isaiah 43: 16-17).

As God liberated them from the bondage of Pharaoh; He also liberated them from the Babylonian captivity; both of which were to prepare them for the liberty to be enjoyed when the Savior brought us forth from the servitude of the devil to the glorious liberty of the children of God.

- + Even though, to keep the Egyptians from following His people, or to flee from the sea, *“God took off their chariot wheels to keep them from following His people; so that they drove them with difficulty” (Exodus 15: 25); yet they did not fear God whose might they saw.*

(St. (Mar) Ephraim the Syrian)

- + That people of God, liberated from the wide and great Egypt, were themselves buried in the water of baptism,By the same secret of the Red Sea, namely by the water of baptism, they were consecrated by the blood of Christ; whereas their enemies, the Egyptians, namely the sins, perished when they followed them..

(St. Augustine)

7- THE DIVINE CARE IN THE WILDERNESS:

Here he concentrates on the heart which is strengthened by the contemplation in the divine glory, and the perpetual divine grace. By which it cries out inside, seeking the divine help.

“Moreover You led them by day with a cloudy pillar, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the road which they should travel” (12)

“You led them by day with a cloudy pillar” (Exodus 13: 21-22; Numbers 14: 14; Deuteronomy 1: 33).

Their salvation did not stop at crossing over the Red Sea, and the perdition of Pharaoh; but God accompanied them all along their way, leading them and shading them from the heat of the sun by day by a cloudy pillar; and by a pillar of fire, to give them light to scatter the darkness by night.

In His love, God intends to accompany His believers day and night, to lead and to guide them, until He brings them forth to the heavenly Canaan.

8- GOD GIVES THEM THE LAW:

“You came down also on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments” (13)

In the midst of the wilderness God granted them the law; delivered it to the prophet Moses, to let the people be conformed to what is befitting of them being

the heavenly bride, that should bear the features of her Groom. Even though the commandment for them appeared to be difficult, yet it exposed their sins, and prepared them or be led to Christ the Savior, who gives the commandment an exalted sweetness, and grants us His righteousness.; *“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes”* (Romans 10: 4).

- + The shining of the coming of Christ, the law of Moses was enlightened by the splendor of truth, and by lifting up the veil that covered the letter of the law, and locked it up; for everyone who believes in Him, and hides in himself the good things.

+ The law and the commandments were given, to save the people from harm;

And when liberty keeps herself by righteousness, (the man of dust) is raised up high, being justified;

That is why Moses brought the two tablets down from Mount Sinai, to let the world live by the spiritual law;

And as the life of men is dear to God, He taught them how to live with righteousness;

And loving them even more, He sent His own Son to bring them up from the fall they were in.

+ The enlightening law that came down on Mount Sinai to scatter the darkness of paganism from the creation, used every way to prove that there is a Creator of the worldThe people were holding to the law as a light source..

(St. (Mar) Jacob El-Serougi)

comparing between delivering the law to Jacob's daughter through the prophet Moses on Mount Sinai, and the descent of the Word of God Himself to be enjoyed by the daughter of the peoples, St. (Mar) Jacob El-Serougi says:

+ The former despised Him, with such majesty and splendor; and the later pure one, with ignorance, followed the Son;

He did not come down to her by angels, as He did on Mount Sinai, and was not proclaimed to her by the trumpets of the heavenly hosts;

Nor by the mist, the cloud, or the flames of fire; Nor by filling the place with smoke;

But the Son of the Most High came down on earth with humility;

He appeared to humanity in swaddles, hunger, thirst, labor, and need;

He was tempted in the desolate wilderness by the devil; and was called the ruler of the demons by the non-believers;

The winds of doubt blew on Him from every direction; and was criticized because He ate together with the sinners;

He was reviled because He mixed with the tax-collectors; and was told to pay tribute to the king;

He had no place to lay His head; was girded with a towel like a slave; and washed the feet of the men of dust He created by His own hands;

He was sold by those who accompanied Him; and was denied by those who followed Him;

He was interrogated by the ruler like a criminal;

He was scourged like a transgressor, while embracing a pillar, and clothed in the attire of shame by the wicked people;

They twisted a crown of thorns and put it over his head; and He was smitten He was asked, '*Prophecy, who is it that struck You?*' (Luke 22: 63)

He came out carrying the tree of the cross on His shoulders; and was nailed on it by the wicked;

“For His clothing, they cast a lot” (Matthew 27: 35); and was offered a sponge with bitter vinegar to sip;

His side was mercilessly pierced by a spear; was embalmed, wrapped, and buried.

(St. (Mar) Jacob El-Serougi)

9- GOD CARES FOR THE PEOPLE’S NEEDS:

“You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, and commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, by the hand of Moses Your servant” (14)

Your holy Sabbath: (Exodus 8: 11; 31: 13-17; Deuteronomy 5: 15). It so seems that the Jews did not keep the Sabbath of the Lord in the land of captivity; and even after they returned to Jerusalem. After talking about the divine statutes and judgment in a general way, He talks here about the commandment of keeping the Sabbath in particular, and calls it *“Your Holy Sabbath”*. If the word ‘Sabbath’ means (comfort), God gives His commandment, to have comfort in His people, being the heavenly father, whose children enjoy His feature of holiness; for them to have comfort in and by Him; for He is their comfort, peace, joy, and glory.

“God rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done” (Genesis 2: 2), was a prophecy, looking at Christ, being physically worn out on Friday, to find comfort from the labor of the cross on Saturday. When they offered him bitter vinegar on the cross, He tasted it , and said: *“It is finished” (John 19: 30);* the

passion and the way of the cross was completed;Yet, the Sabbath did not put an end to Christ's work, for He came to preach to the souls held prisoners in Hades;All the dead felt Him, and with His life-filled teaching, He dealt with the souls that rebelled against the teaching of the righteous 'Noah'.Jesus became a fetus, to be received by the fetuses (John the Baptist in his mother's womb); And died to be received by the dead Elizabeth was barren; so was Hades. And from two barren bosoms, He was received by Adam and John the Baptist -- Adam from Hades, and John from Elizabeth.

What our Lord did among the dead on the Sabbath was beyond description, and unutterable by the tongue. Hades was ridden by awe the day He entered it; the way a city is, before a king who comes to liberate those who are in its prisons.. On that very day (the Sabbath) our Lord had comfort from the passion of the cross to consummate the work of salvation; for the goal of His coming was to liberate the captives from the pit of perdition.

Coming from the Father to the Virgin Mary; and from her to the manger; crucified between evildoers; endured, by His own free will, all what was prophesied by the prophets; He went through all that for the sake of that work He consummated on the Sabbath in Hades (the twenty-third message).

+ On the sad Sabbath, the Son of the free was among the dead; and on Sunday, He was celebrated in a procession by the heavenly hosts.

Friday scattered the apostles by the sword; and Sunday brought them gladness, and gathered the disciples together.

Yesterday, the apostles were hiding underground; and today they came out to watch with amazement

Yesterday was defeat, scattering, and hiding; and today there are running, gathering, and preaching.

(St. (Mar) Jacob El-Seougi)

10- THE PEOPLE'S REBELLION:

. *“You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, and brought them water out of the rock for their thirst, and told them to go in to possess the land which You had sworn to give them” (15)*

Go allows for us, in the wilderness of this world, to get hungry and thirsty, in order to experience the sweetness of satisfaction. He would never let us be in need of anything; He is our satisfaction in this world, and that to come.

“Bread from heaven” (Exodus 16: 4; 10-35; Psalm 78: 24; 15: 40; John 6: 51, 32, 58).

“Water out of the rock” (Exodus 17: 6; Numbers 20: 8; Psalm 105: 41).

+ **The divine gifts did not soften their hearts.** To make this clear by examples from all the nations:.

Consider the gifts given to the Jews, (on their exodus from Egypt)

Haven't all seen how the creation served them; and haven't they got new and unique ways of life?¹

In the wilderness, they did not have to go the market, but got everything free;they did not have to work the land for plantation, nor to use a

plow, nor to sow seeds; nor needed rain, wind, sun rays, etc.; They did not thresh wheat grains, nor used a winnow to separate the wheat from straw; nor needed a grinding stone, nor an oven; nor brought wood or fire into a house, nor needed any tools for weaving textiles, for building houses, or making shoes; etc. But the Word of God was everything for them.

They had a banquet not prepared by human hand; without labor or strife; for that was the nature of the Manna, always new, and fresh

+ Christ came to be everything for you: the table, the clothing, the house, the Head, and the Origin. *"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"* (Galatians 3: 27).

Do you wish to know how your clothing and food came to be?: Christ says: *"As I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me"* (John 6: 27)

He came to be your dwelling place: *"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood, abides in Me, and I in him"* (John 6" 56)

To show that He is our origin, and our foundation, He says: *"I am the vine, you are the branches"* (John 15: 5)

To show that He is your Brother, Friend, and Groom; He says: *"No longer do I call you servants, but I have called you friends"* (John 15: 15).

Again the apostle Paul says: *"For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ"* (2 Corinthians 11: 2); and, *"... that He might be the firstborn among many brethren"* (Romans 8: 29)

Not only Have we come to be His brethren, but His children as well; saying: *"Here am I and the children whom the Lord has given Me"* (Isaiah 8: 18). We have not only become His children, but *"Now we are the body of Christ, and members individually"* (1 Corinthians 12: 27)

If the things I referred to are not enough to prove His love and compassion shown by Him toward us; He presents to us another thing more important, that He is our Head (Ephesians 1: 22-23).

(St. John Chrysostom)

""But they and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments" (16)

They hardened their necks; an analogy to a stubborn bull resistant to its owner.

+ The unfaithful stubborn people most probably despised Moses, and almost stoned him to death; but in longsuffering he prayed for them to the Lord (Number 14: 13).

(Cyprian the martyr)

+ Every sin implies a disregard of the divine law; by which man exalts himself above the knowledge of God..

(St. Basil the Great)

“They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. But they hardened their necks, and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them” (17)

“They refused to obey” (1 Samuel 8: 19; Jeremiah 11: 10)

They were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them” (Psalm 6: 22)

You are God, ready to pardon: (psalm 130: 4; Daniel 9: 9)

Amazingly, man often, would rather return to bondage to his violent tyrant fellow man, than to enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God, the Maker of wonders.

Here, he refers to what came in the book of Numbers, when the people grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying: *“If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why had the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?. So they said to one another, ‘Let us select a leader and return to Egypt”* (Numbers 13: 14)

- + I, the sinner, perpetually need treatment
- + Every time we receive Him (in Communion), we proclaim the death of the Lord. And by His death we proclaim the forgiveness of sins. If shedding blood is for the sake of the forgiveness of sins, it would be perpetually befitting of me to receive Him, to forgive my sins.

“Even when they made a molded calf for themselves, and said, ‘This is your god That brought you up out of Egypt,’ and worked great provocations” (18)

Having rebelled against God their Savior, and forgot the wonders He has done among them, they wallowed in corruption, and in great provocation they made for themselves a molded calf (Exodus 32: 4-8; Deuteronomy 4: 16), a god for themselves, and counted it as the one who brought them out of Egypt. By their own free will they hardened their necks against God their Savior, and bowed them to the golden statue, the calf of Ebis, to enslave themselves to it.

+ He who wallows in the mire pit, and sink in it, would fall in the nets of treason; for the people sat to eat and drink, and sought to have gods made for them.

(St. Ambrose)

11- GOD'S MULTITUDES OF MERCIES:

"Yet in Your manifold mercies You did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of the cloud did not depart from them by day, to lead them on the road; nor the pillar

of fire by night, to show them light, and the way they should go" (19)

The word '**mercy**' bears the meaning of deep compassion toward our beloved or those who are in need of our support.

"You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold Your manna from their mouth, and gave them water for their thirst" (20)

"Your good Spirit: God granted the seventy elders the same Spirit He granted to Moses, to let them carry together with him the same burdens; By that Spirit, they prophesied, and began to ordain the issues of the people who were increasing in evil and ungodliness (Numbers 11: 24-25).

"Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness; they

lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out , and their feet did not swell.” (21)

They lacked nothing” (Deuteronomy 2: 7; 8: 4)

Their clothes did not wear out” (Deuteronomy 29: 5)

- + Their clothes did not wear out with time; and their feet did not swell because of long walking. There is no mention of any physician or medications among them; yet they lost their natural weakness, as is written: *“He brought them out with silver and gold, and there was none feeble among His tribes”* (Psalm 105: 37)..... The heat of the sun did not harm them, because there was a cloud that shaded them and provided them with a movable environment protecting their bodies..... They did not need flames to scatter the darkness of the night, because they had a pillar of fire that performed two jobs: gave them light, and guided them to the right way in the wilderness, better than any human guide could doThey walked in the sea, as though on dry land, against the laws of nature ; and when their enemies tried to follow them, the sea returned to its nature. So it became a chariot to the former, and a tomb to the later..... The irrational sea played the role of the most clever judge: it was once a guard, and another time an avenger, both controversial roles on the same day.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- + The wicked unbeliever, even if we suppose that he is clothed with a heavenly body, he would remain naked; because he does nothing to earn the clothing of the inner man.

(St. Dedymus the blind)

12- IN THE PROMISED LAND:

“Moreover You gave them kingdoms and nations, and divided them into districts So they took possession of the land of Sihon, The land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan” (22)

Saying: **“Divided them into district”**, probably refers to the region across the Jordan; for He led them all along the journey in the wilderness; and let them take possession of kingdoms and nations East and West of the Jordan. It was not easy for a people with no military experience since their first day in the land of Egypt, where they were no more than shepherded the sheep, to get continuous conquests on peoples and nations more experienced in war; they possessed even the land of ‘Sihon’, the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of the Og king of Bashan.

Sihon: An Ammorite king who, attempting to prevent the Jews from passing through his land, on their way to the promised land, was defeated, and his land was given as a heritage to the tribes of Israel (Numbers 21: 21-29). He came to be an example of anyone who dares to oppose God and His people. And as said by the psalmist: *“He defeated many nations , and slew mighty kings – Sihon king*

of the Ammorites, Og king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan; and gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to Israel His people” (Psalm 135: 10-12).

Hashbon: the capital of Sihon king of the Ammorites. It was originally a possession of the Moabites; then was taken by the children of Israel under the leadership of the prophet Moses (Numbers 21: 25-26). Known nowadays as ‘Hasban’, is located on the border line between the two tribes of Gad and Reuben.

Og” king of Bashan, a descendant of the Raphites; was of long stature, a mighty man of valor, and had a huge iron bed. He was slain by the children of Israel in Edrei, and they occupied his land..

*“You also multiplied their children as the stars of heaven,
and brought them into the land which You had told their fathers to
go in and possess” (23).*

*“So the people went in And possessed the land; You
subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, The Canaanites,
and gave them into their hands, with their kings And*

*the people of the land, that they might do with them as they
wished”)24)*

By that God’s promise to Abraham was fulfilled, and his descendants entered into the promised land (Genesis 22: 17; 26: 4; Exodus 32: 13; Deuteronomy 1: 8; 10: 22) .

“You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites
(Deuteronomy 9: 3; Judges 1: 4) together with their kings (Deuteronomy 7: 24; Joshua 11: 12, 17)..

“And they took strong cities and a rich land, and possessed houses full of all goods, cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and grew fat, and delighted themselves in Your great goodness” (25)

This list of lands, cities, houses, etc. conforms to the list mentioned in the covenant of Sinai, and its renewal as it came in (Deuteronomy 6: 10-11; Joshua 24: 13).

“the strong cities” refer to Jericho, Lechish, and Hazor.

The cisterns already dug: As rain was scarce most of the year; every house was provided with a well or a cistern to store the rain water (2 kings 18: 31; Proverbs 5: 15).

In the year 1200 BC, dams were erected to store the rain waters that fall on the hills of Judah.

The most prominent trees of Palestine are Olive trees, Fig trees, Apple trees, Almond and walnut trees, berries, and pomegranates (Deuteronomy 8: 8; 2 kings 18: 32); Beside the palm trees that grow in the Valley of the Jordan.

On entering into Canaan, God warned His people against cutting any fruit tree; for they had enough crops of everything to satisfy them and bring gladness to their life.

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“Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against You, cast Your law behind their backs and killed Your prophets, who testified against them to turn them to Yourself;

and they worked great provocations” (26)

Concerning casting the law behind their backs, and killing the prophets, working great provocations, see (1 kings 18: 4; 19: 10, 14; 2 Chronicles 24: 20-23; Jeremiah 26: 20-23);

According to the early tradition, God continued to give, and Israel continued to deny.

- + ***“No prophet is accepted in his own country”*** (Luke 4: 24). As did Anathoth the home land of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 11: 24); and as it happened with Isaiah and the rest of the prophets, who were not accepted by the people of circumcisionWhile we, who do not belong to the covenant, received Moses and the prophets who proclaimed Christ, by our whole hearts, contrary to the Jews who rejected Christ, and the testimony to Him.

(The scholar Origen)

“ Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies, who oppressed them; and in the time of their trouble, when they cried to You, You heard from heaven;

and according to Your abundant mercies You gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies” (27)

You gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies; mighty men of valor, like Gideon, Jephtah, and Samson, .

“But after they had rest, They again did evil before You. Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies, So that they had dominion over them; Yet when

they returned and cried out to You, You heard from heaven; And many times You delivered them according to Your mercies” (28)

The book of the Judges provides us with a record of the continuous and repetitive circles of God’s salvation work, and of the people’s revolts, once they have affliction; and when they cry out to Him, He sends to them a judge to deliver them; and so on,

+ The sin is so heavy that it need great mercies

(St. Jerome)

“And testified against them, that You might bring them back to Your law. Yet they acted proudly, and did not heed Your commandments, but sinned against Your judgments, ‘which if a man does, he shall live by them. And they

shrugged their shoulders, stiffened their necks, and would not hear” (29).

“ Yet for many years You had patience with them, and testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands” (30).

“ Nevertheless in Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them; For You are God, gracious and merciful” (31).

13- A CONFESSION OF SINS:

² *“Now therefore, our God, The great, the mighty, and awesome God, Who keeps covenant and mercy: Do not let all the trouble seem small before You That has come upon us,
Our kings and our princes, Our priests and our prophets, Our fathers and on all Your people, From the days of the kings of Assyria until this day” (32)*

After such a long history of God's dealings with His people -- even though he did not refer to the periods of reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon -- he brings us forth to the present time. He mixes the past with the present, to make his talk more practical and living. For God, the Mighty and the Keeper of the covenant, who worked in history, still works (Deuteronomy 7: 9; 1 kings 8: 23; 2 Chronicles 6: 14).

Since the Assyrian invasion, the situation became serious. Successive afflictions came upon all categories, from the kings, to the rulers, the priests, the prophets, and the common people.

- + Faith bears two integral aspects: love and fear. I don't fear my father, the way I fear a vicious wild beast; which I fear and hate; while my father I fear and love him at the same time..... My fear of punishment, is actually a love for myself through my fear. He who fears to disobey his father, therefore, loves himself.....Blessed is he who has the faith, for he bears both love and fear.

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

"However You are just in all that has befallen us; For You have dealt faithfully, But we have done wickedly" (33)

With the bitterness of affliction, Nehemiah confesses that God is righteous; and that what dwelt upon all is a natural fruit of iniquity..

"Neither our kings nor our princes, Our priests nor our fathers, Have kept Your law, Nor heeded Your commandments and Your testimonies, With which You testified against them" (34)

Again, Nehemiah confesses that all could be consecrated; for within their hands are all the possibilities. But all refrained to heed God's commandments and testimonies..

“For they have not served You in their kingdom, Or in the many good things that You gave them, Or in the large and rich land which You set before them; Nor did they turn from their wicked works”
(35)

Man often gets preoccupied with the blessings given to him By God, more than with God Himself, the Giver of the blessings; We often trust in our possessions and wealth than in Him who gave them to us.

The good things of God refer to His goodness; for what He gives us is because of His goodness, namely His love. However, as the Good God Himself has come to us in flesh, and dwelt among us; by getting united with Him, we enjoy the spirit of goodness, and come to be an icon of Him.

The large and rich land, He has set before them, refers to heaven, wide to accommodate all believers; and rich to pour upon them an abundance of the fruit of joy and peace.

“Here we are, servants today! And the land that You gave to our fathers, To eat its fruit and its bounty, Here we are, servants in it!” (36)

He who feeds upon sin and drinks it, will fall into its net; his will be dissolved and weakened; to find himself a servant of it in humiliation. Being not able to free himself of it, he even longs for it.No wonder, for whoever is addicted to drugs, the more he uses it the more he comes to be its captive; and the more his longing for it will increase.

+ Everyone: a Jew, or a Greek, rich or poor, one of authority or a common man, an emperor or a beggar, “ *whoever commits sin is a slave of sin*”

(John 8: 34). Once man recognizes his servitude, he knows how to acquire liberty.

He who is born free, then is captivated by the barbarians, he becomes a slave; and when someone who hears about him, and has compassion on him, goes to the barbarians and gives them a ransom to redeem him; he would truly take away oppression from him, and bring him back to liberty,..... Therefore, you should not boast in yourself when you are redeemed; and you who redeemed, should not boast either; but both of you should run to the true Redeemer, who calls those in sin “its servants”/

Man fears to fall into captivity, brought over him by his iniquity. Why?Did He err, He who said: *“Let the dead bury their own dead”* (Matthew 8: 22)? No! for all those under sin are dead; dead in their ministry, and ministers (servants) in their death.

(St. Augustine)

“And it yields much increase to the kings You have set over us, Because of our sins; Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle At their pleasure; And we are in great distress” (37)

Who are those kings, set upon our bodies, and our cattle, but our evil desires and sins, before which we open the doors of our minds and hearts; to deliver to them the leadership of our inner man, and to let them enslave us according to their will.According to the Evangelist St. John, Jesus said: *“Most assuredly I say to you: Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin”* (John 8: 34).

+ He is a slave! Not to another man, but to sin!

Who would not be terrified by such words?..... Our Lord God grants us – You and I – to talk about this liberty with befitting words, and to search for it; in order to avoid falling into its servitude.

How miserable is such servitude! When man suffers under a wicked boss, he would seek to change him;To whom will the slave of sin resort? With whom will he seek salvation? Where will he flee? For he carries his mistress (namely the sin) wherever he goes..... The evil conscience cannot flee from itself; There is nowhere it can go.

Man cannot withdraw from himself; for the sin he commits is within him; he commits it to get some temporary carnal pleasure; but the pleasure will pass on, and the sin will stay; the sting will remain behind!What a wicked servitude!

Let us then all flee to the Lord Christ; and complain against sin to Him, being our Savior.

Let us seek to be sold, for Him to save us with His blood; For the Lord says: *“You have sold yourselves for nothing; And you shall be redeemed without money”* (Isaiah 52: 3). You will be saved with no price on your

part; So He says, because He has already paid it, not by money, but by His precious blood; otherwise we would remain needy slaves.

(St. Augustine)

+ In case the carnal desires overcome us, and we came to be slaves in this battle, we shall not be carriers of the sign of liberty, nor that of power; and we shall be excluded from the strife against the spiritual hosts, as

unqualified slaves, with all the confusion that may cause; *“For whoever commits sin is a slave of sin”* (John 8: 34). The apostle warns us against being ‘adulterers’ (1 Corinthians 10: 8); and says: *“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man”* (1 Corinthians 10: 13), because if we do not try to perceive the power of the mind, we shall not be qualified to enter into a stronger strife against evil on a higher level, if we fail to submit our weak body that resist the Spirit.

- + Even though the holy Baptism grants us complete liberty; yet man has absolute freedom of will; either to get himself enslaved again to evil desires, or to remain free to keep the commandments.

In case an evil thought sticks to the mind, it would be our own doing, and not against our will for the Book says that we are given authority to “*bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ*” (2 Corinthians 10: 5). For those who bring the evil thought into captivity, it would then be a sign of their love of God, and not of sin.....The existence of evil thought is not a sin by itself, but the sin lies when the mind enter into a friendly and amiable relationship with it.; We would never have a long conversation with what we hate from our whole heart; unless we happen to have a hidden fellowship with it. Otherwise, why are we slothful toward it?

(Father Mark the hermit)

14- THE RENEWAL OF THE COVENANT:

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

Having presented a collective repentance, the people were committed to renew the covenant with God. Having confessed that they, like their fathers before them, have broken the covenant again and again, and did not show faithfulness, analogous to God’s faithfulness and longsuffering on them; they sought to put the covenant in writing, to sign and seal it by their leaders, Levites, and priests; to testify against them in the future if they break it again.

God granted their fathers the promised land, and drove away before them peoples and nations, to let them live in a perfect liberty. But, even though they were already in the promised land, sin shackled them in the bonds of servitude

anew. Man, therefore, was in need of changing his location, as much as of renewing his depths, to enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God.

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 9

LET ME RETURN TO YOU, O GREAT IN MERCIES

- + Grant me, O Lord, to fast from everything;
For You are my satisfaction;
I shall never live in need;
As long as You fill all my void;
Acquiring You, I shall be in need of nothing more.

- + Let me arise from my slothfulness,
and sit at Your feet together with Mary and Martha, sisters of Lazarus;
To hear Your voice, and to enjoy the sweetness of Your commandment;
For "*Your yoke is easy, and Your burden is light*" (Matthew 11: 30).
Your commandment kindles my whole depths with the fire of Your love;
Together with the whole creation I partake of singing Your praise
O Creator, great with Your love;
O Savior, who opens the gates of heaven before us;
How shall we pay Your abundant goodness back?

- + Going back to the past, I see all history within Your hands;
 You gave my father Abram a new name;
 By which he got the fatherhood of all believers. And Sarai became the
mother of them all;
 Grant me love for everyone
 Make me worthy of carrying Your icon, O Love!
- + You let my fathers in need of nothing;
 You poured mercies over them;
 You gave them more than what they asked, and beyond what they sought;
 You were always longsuffering on them;
 But they paid You back with murmur and denial;
 Your cross takes my denial away from me;
 Your cross carries me into Your bosom;
 Your cross liberates me from the servitude of sin.
- + You saved Your people from the bondage of Pharaoh;
 And liberated them from the captivity of Babylon;
 And behold, You liberate them now from the bondage of the devil;
 By You, I deny the devil and all his hosts;
 By You I enjoy Your righteousness, and live with You;
 By You I enjoy unceasing conquests.

+ Let me return to You, and be attached to You;
Let Your Holy Spirit lead me;
Let Him perpetually renew my depths;
Let Him lift me up from glory to glory;
Until the day I encounter You.

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CHAPTER 10

RENEWAL OF THE COVENANT

As the wall was completed, all presented repentance to God by fasting and prayers, and remembered God's dealings with their fathers, Now all categories of the people came forward to renew the covenant with God.

Our relationship with God is not confined in the buildings of worship and ministry; but it is an attachment to the Lord, and a reaction to His love, that reflects on our life on every aspect, whether concerning worship in the church life within the families, or behavior in the society in the Lord.

The covenant was sealed by the governor (1), representatives of the priests (2-8), the Levites (9-13), and the leaders of the people (14-27). All consented on its items (28-29), which are:

- a- To walk according to the law of God, and to keep all His commandments
- b- To refrain from marrying pagan spouses
- c- To keep the Sabbath (Amos 8: 5). To give rest to the land in the seventh year, as it came in the law (Exodus 23: 10-11). And to grant a release of debt in the seventh year (Deuteronomy 15: 1, 2)
- d- To fulfill the needs of the temple and its maintenance; to give tithes; to pay the temple tax, (that later became annual) (Matthew 17: 24); for the temple was committed to spend upon those who work in it. And as poverty prevailed at that time on the whole congregation, they made it nominal (32: 2; Luke 8: 12)..... And to bring wood to the temple (34); although this did not come in the law;

So the people renewed the covenant on the day of the dedication..

Nehemiah, the governor cared to put his seal on the covenant, followed by the spiritual and the civil leaders (1-27). As to the rest of the people, they pledged orally by a vow to commit themselves to it (28, 29)

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1- A list of those who put their seal on the covenant | 1 - 29 |
| 2- The conditions of the covenant | 30 – 39 |

1- A LIST OF THOSE WHO PLACED THEIR SEAL ON THE COVENANT:

The legally sealed document included 84 names, which came in order according to the following categories: the governor or the leader (1 or 2); the high priest and the priests (21 or 22); the Levites (17); the heads of the people (44).

a- The governor or the leader: (1)

*“Now those who placed their seal on the document were:
Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah” (1)*

Zedekiah: of unknown identity; yet, to be mentioned directly after the governor, and before the priests, makes some believe that he was the scribe or the assistant of the governor. While according to others, he was one of

the priests or one of the heads of the priests' groups. Their number would, therefore be 22 and not 21.

b- The priests or the heads of the groups of priests: (3 – 8)

“Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah” (2)

The verses 2 to 8 include 21 names, most of which appear in Nehemiah 12: 1-7.

“Pashhur, Amariah, Malchija” (3)

“Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch” (4)

“Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah” (5)

“Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch” (6)

“Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin” (7)

“Maaziah, Bilgai, and Shemaiah. These were the priests” (8)

The heads of the groups of priests, mentioned here are 21, while their number came as 22 in Nehemiah 12: 1-7. According to some their number was 24, and the rest were either absent or abstained from putting their

seal on the covenant.

c- The Levites: (9-13)

“The Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, and Kadmiel” (9)

The verses 9 – 13 concerning the Levites, referred to 17 names; most of whom used to lead the congregation in prayers (Nehemiah 9: 4-5), and in the procedure of sealing the covenant.

“Their brethren: Shebaniah, Hodijah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan”
(10)

“Micha, Rehob, Hashabiah” (11)

“Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah” (12)

“Hodijah, Bani, and Beninu” (13)

d- The leaders of the people: (14 – 27).

“The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-Moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani” (14)

After the Levites, 44 leaders of the people put their seal on the covenant on behalf of the whole congregation. The names here came different from what came in Nehemiah 7 and Ezra 2, because of the difference in time.

“Bunni, Azgad, Bebai” (15)

“Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin” (16)

“Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur” (17)

“Hodijah, Hashum, Beza” (18)

“Hariph, Anathoth, Neba” (19)

Anathoth, the name is derived from that of the Canaanite goddess ;Anath'; and is also the name of the village of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1: 1).

“Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir” (20)

Hezir means a pig (see 1 Chronicles 24: 15); Calling by the names of animals and insects, was common among the Hebrews.

“Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua” 21)

“Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah” (22)

“Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub” (23)

“Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek” (24)

“Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah” (25)

“Ahijah, Hanan, Anan” (26)

“Malluch, Harim, and Baanah” (27)

e- Others who came together with their children to show their consent on the covenant:

As it was not practical for all to put their seal on the covenant, they showed their consent on it, either orally or by raising their hands; and were committed to it through a vow to walk in the law of God, and bring a curse upon

themselves if they break it.

“Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands

to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding” (28)

All those present including the women and the children, proclaimed their commitment to the renewal of the covenant. Now, if the children in the old were committed to renew the covenant; it would be befitting, in the era of grace, not to deny the children the grace of the new covenant through baptism. The church since her apostolic time, knowing the importance of bringing the children into the membership of the secret body of Christ, and perceiving the value of their souls, designated the baptism of the children under the responsibility of their parents or (God-fathers or mothers), and put strict rules against slothfulness in this

concern.. In his epistle to the people of Smyrna that described the martyrdom of St. Polycarp in the second century AD, the martyr proclaimed: [For the last 86 years I have been ministering to Christ]; referring to the fact that he began his ministry since he was baptized in his early childhood.....St. Clement of Alexandria referred to the baptism of the little children. Then came his disciple Origen to say: [The church received from the apostles the tradition of baptizing the little children, to cleanse them from the inherited defilement by the sacrament of baptism] . And the laws of Hypoletus referred to the baptism of the little children, under the responsibility of the grown-ups.

+ The Lord Jesus Christ came to save all to Himself, namely all those born by Him, whether children, youth, or elders.

+ The children, the young, and the elders, get the new birth in God.

(St. Erinaos)

The renewal of the covenant also included those who entered into faith in God, of the pagan nations; for the doors of God's mercies are wide open before all who come to Him from all nations, peoples, tongues, and tribes.

“ -- these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe

and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes” (29)

As there are: One Lord, one covenant, one baptism, and one hope for all, it would be befitting of all to be attached together in one body.

“all the commandments of the Lord”; For it is befitting of the believer to have a pure and a faithful heart, not to falter between two opinions, but becomes whole for God; long to keep faithfully all the commandments through the exalted grace of God.

2- THE CODITIONS OF THE COVENANT:

a- To refrain from marrying pagan wives (30), from getting into mixed marriages (Ezra 9-10)

“We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons” (30)

For the believer to have his heart wide open to love all mankind, does not mean to be slothful in the salvation of his own soul, and in his enjoyment of the sacred life. It was befitting of the people not to enter into mixed marriage with the unbelievers, lest the idol-worship with its abomination would crawl into them; as commanded by God in Deuteronomy 7: 3-4. As it so often happened that, because of such marriage, the people perverted to idol-worship (1 kings 11: 1-11). God said: *“For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth”* (Deuteronomy 7: 6).

It is befitting of the family to be like a holy church, an icon of heaven; Of the parents to live in the presence of the Holy One; And of the children to experience the holy, exultant heavenly life, through the holy relationship between their parents, and their relationship with them. The (constitution) of the family is not just for the sake of emotional, social, psychological, and financial benefits; but it is the deposit of the eternal life.

According to St. John Chrysostom, [The holy house is like a little church].

+ Matrimony is greater than to be a human institution; it is a miniature kingdom of the Lord.

+ Who are the two or three, gather together in the name of Christ, in whose midst the Lord will dwell (Matthew 18: 20)? Are they not the man, his wife, and their child, for the man and his wife unite by God?

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

+ Matrimony is a spiritual gift, yet it would not be as such, in case of mixed marriage to unbelievers. For the Spirit of God is not given to dwell in unbelievers.

+ The man and the wife are one, like wine and water when mixed. And as the believer would be corrupted by an unbelieving partner, he who is not yet married, should either not marry at all, or marry in the Lord.

(The scholar Origen)

b- keeping the Sabbath and the Sabbath of the years (31)

“if the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and we would forego the

seventh year’s produce and the exacting of every debt”.(31)

The second condition is to keep the Sabbath, the holy days, and the Sabbath of the years; in which it is not allowed to buy or to sell. (Jeremiah 17: 19-27; Amos 8: 5; Exodus 23: 10-11; Leviticus 25: 2-7; Deuteronomy 15: 1-3).

The material benefit was behind every dealing with the pagans during the holy days, to break the Sabbath and not to keep the feasts. It is befitting of the believer not to replace God with money, and not to set the material benefit a god for himself; as the Sabbath for God is His comfort, not to be used in gathering profit, but to enjoy the Grantor of the eternal treasures -- God Himself. If the believer puts God first before anything else; He will count him also first and honor him; for *"with the same measure we use, it will be measured back to us"*. (Matthew 7: 1).

"Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God" (32)

The temple was rebuilt under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 6: 14-15), 70 years before; And it was befitting of the people to observe their commitment to fulfill the needs of the house of the Lord, by dedicating their tithes and their firstfruits to God, to spend on the poor, on the needs of the ministers, on the expenses of preaching, and on the testimony to the gospel of Christ.

The rest of the conditions of the covenant deal with the offerings to the temple, according to what came in Exodus 30: 13-14. It was before, half a shekel on every male, twenty years old and over, as a symbolic redemption. Why is it now written *"one-third of a shekel"*? Because as the value of the shekel now increased, the third now became equal to a half shekel then.

Later king Joash used those offerings to repair the temple (2 Chronicles 24: 4-14). And even in the new covenant, every Jew, wherever he may be, was

committed to send half a shekel or what is equivalent to the temple in Jerusalem.
(Matthew 17: 24).

“for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to

make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God” (33)

The showbread included 12 loaves of bread put in two rows every Sabbath
(Leviticus 24: 6-7);

The grain offerings came in Exodus 29: 38-41; Numbers 28: 3-8).

The burnt offerings came in Ezra 8: 35

The feast of the new moons and others came in Numbers 28: 9-16.

Making atonement for Israel; means to wipe out their sins..

c- Paying the temple tax and bringing the wood offering into the house of God: (34)

“We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for bringing the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers’ houses, at the appointed times

year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as it is written in the Law” (34)

Casting a lot among the people of God in the old covenant to know the will of God was done, when there is no prophet to inquire from him:

a- To Distribute the promised land on the tribes (Numbers 26: 55; Joshua 14: 2; 18: 10).

- a- To reveal a criminal (Joshua 7: 14; 1 Samuel 14: 42; Jonah 1: 7)
- b- To choose the first king of Israel (1 Samuel 10: 19-21)
- c- To “*causes contentions to cease, and keeps the mighty apart*” (Proverbs 18: 18)
- d- To designate the portion of the priests, the singers, and the gatekeepers (1 Chronicles 24: 5; 25: 8; 26: 13; Luke 1: 9)
- e- To designate who may dwell in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11: 1)

On the day of Atonement in the old covenant, a lot was cast to know the goat for the Lord from the one to be the scapegoat (for Azazel (Leviticus 16: 8)).

And in the new covenant it was done to choose the apostle to replace Judas the traitor (Acts 1: 26).After the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, we do not hear that they have cast a lot, but the Holy Spirit told them what to do (Acts 11: 12); refers to whom He chooses for a specific work (Acts 13: 2); and grants the unity of view in the congregation (Acts 15: 28).

Bringing the wood offering into the house of the Lord, We find no reference to a commandment that concerns this commitment in the five books of Moses; other than a reference to its use in the episode of offering Isaac a sacrifice to God; and what came in the book of Leviticus: “*The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar, and lay the wood in order on the fire*” (Leviticus 1: 7)

It was the responsibility of the Nethinim to prepare the wood for the altar (Ezra 2: 43). But because of captivity, the Nethinim were scattered, and the system concerning them collapsed. After the return from captivity, as not enough of them returned to Jerusalem, it was necessary for all the categories of the people to partake of this responsibility, and a lot was cast to distribute that responsibility on different families in different times of the year. It was called “*the wood offering*” here, in Nehemiah 13: 31; and nowhere else..... That is how it led to set a

feast for “*the wood offering*” to be celebrated on a specific day of the month of ‘Ab’ (August); the last day of the year when wood was cut for this purpose by all the tribes of Israel to offer to the temple. That day was kept with joy on a collective level, and it was not allowed to fast nor to mourn in it.

e- **The tithes and the firstfruits (35-38)**

“And we made ordinances to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD” (35)

BESIDE WHAT THE PEOPLE WERE COMMITTED TO PAY AS A TRIBUTE TO THE ACCOUNT OF THE KING OF PERSIA, THEY WERE ALSO COMMITTED TO OFFER THE TITHES AND THE FIRSTFRUITS TO THE HOUSE OF THE LORD. OFFERING THE FIRSTFRUITS HAD A CONCEPT DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER GIFT TO THE HOUSE OF THE LORD OR TO THE NEEDY; NAMELY THAT THE BELIEVER SHOULD LIVE IN A HOLY ATMOSPHERE; AND TO COUNT EVERY FIRSTFRUIT AS “HOLY FOR THE LORD”, BY WHOM ALL WILL BE HOLY.

HOW TO CANCEL THIS CAPITAL

LETTERS FORM?

“ I WISH ALL OF US QUOTE EXAMPLES FROM THE HOLY BOOKS, TO FIND OUT WHAT IS HOLY (CONSECRATED), AND TO KNOW THAT THIS DESIGNATION NOT CONFINED TO PERSONS, BUT INCLUDES EVEN THE IRRATIONAL ANIMALS THAT ARE CALLED ‘HOLY’, BESIDE THE VESSELS FOR SERVICE (EXODUS 40: 9), THE ATTIRE OF PRIESTS (EXODUS 28: 2), AND EVEN CERTAIN LOCATIONS THAT WERE COUNTED AS ‘PRIESTLY’ (NUMBERS 35: 1-8). THE LAW SAYS THAT THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THE BULLS AND HERDS ARE TO BE OFFERED AS SACRIFICES TO THE LORD; AND SAYS THAT THEY SHOULD NOT BE USED FOR ANY OTHER PURPOSE, FOR THEY ARE CONSECRATED TO THE LORD

(THE SCHOLAR ORIGEN)

- + DO NOT YOU SEE HOW THE LAW PROCLAIMS GOD'S JUSTICE AND GOODNESS AT THE SAME TIME; HE WHO PRESENTS FOOD WITHOUT LIMITS TO ALL?..... HOW, IN THE HARVEST OF VINES, THE WORKERS ARE ORDERED NOT TO GO BACK TO PLUCK WHAT THEY LEFT ON THE TREES, OR TO GATHER WHAT FELL ON THE GROUND. THE SAME RULES APPLY TO THOSE WHO CROP THE OLIVES (DEUTERONOMY 24: 20-21).

THE FOUNDATION OF THE ORDINANCES THAT CONCERN THE CROPS AND THE HERDS IS ACTUALLY TO TEACH TO HONOR WHAT IS DIVINE. IT IS BEFITTING OF US NOT TO HAVE OUR THOUGHTS COMPLETELY ABSORBED BY THE

MATERIAL PROFITS; BUT TO HAVE COMPASSION ON THE NEEDY AS WELL.

OFFERING THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THE CROPS WAS MEANT TO COVER THE NEEDS OF THE PRIESTS AND THE LEVITES (EXODUS 23: 19; 34: 26; LEVITICUS 19: 23-24; NUMBERS 18: 13; DEUTERONOMY 26: 1-11). ACCORDING TO THE LAW, THE FIRSTFRUITS SHOULD BE OFFERED FROM SEVEN KINDS OF FRUIT TREES, BESIDE THOSE OF EVERY FRUITFUL TREE.. .

“to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister

in the house of our God” (36)

Concerning the firstfruits of the animals, see Exodus 13: 13, 15; 34: 20; Leviticus 27: 26-33; Numbers 3: 44- 51; 18: 15-17; Deuteronomy 14: 32-26. It was befitting of Nehemiah, on the occasion of that new beginning with the building the wall of Jerusalem, to remind his people of God’s command on their exodus from the land of Egypt to offer the firstfruits,

“ to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, the new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring

the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities” (37)

The storerooms refer to some rooms in the temple designated for that purpose (Ezra 8: 29' 10: 6).

To bring the tithes of our land; namely to offer the tithes of the crops; an old custom delivered by oral tradition (Genesis 14: 20; 28: 22)..

“And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our God,

to the rooms of the storehouse” (38)

Taking tithes from all the tribes, the Levites, in their turn were committed to give tithes from what they get (Numbers 18: 25-32).

“For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary are,

where the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers are; and we will not neglect the house of our God” (39).

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 10

EVERY MORNING, O LORD, WE RENEW THE COVENANT WITH YOU

- + Every morning and evening, my depths cry out, saying:
Forgive our trespasses;
This is a daily open confession that we break the law;
And that we are in need every day to renew the covenant with You

- + When shall I see the whole world desire to renew the covenant with You?
Let me start by myself; and by the Spirit, together with my brethren;
My heart, mind, senses, and emotions;
And all the energies of my soul and body;
Are in need of continuous renewal.

- + I confess to You my unfaithfulness;
When You are so amazingly faithful in loving me;
Sanctify me by Your Holy Spirit;
Fill all my depths by Yourself.

- + How can I promise You not to break one commandment;

When I am so weak?

But Your grace is capable of carrying and sanctifying me;

It grants me the strength of the Spirit, to keep me from failing;

It opens before me the doors of hope, so as not ever to despair;

It grants me the spirit of strength, success, and conquest.

+ Take away from me every evil desire;

I wish no one, but You would enter my heart;

Set a wedding inside me;

Proclaim Your kingdom in my depths;

Rejoice in me, and me in You;

As the groom and the bride rejoice in one another.

+ Let all my days be a holy spiritual Sabbath;

Let them be an unceasing joyful feast;

Let me unite with You, O the Resurrection;

To enjoy the resurrected life; the heavenly Sabbath.

+ How my soul moans in me!

When I hear You saying: "*The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*"
(Luke 9: 58).

Will You condescend and lay it in my heart?

To live perpetually in the day of the Lord;

And to let You be my true feast.

+ What should I offer to the house of my God?
Receive my whole life united with You, O the Firstborn.
For by You I would be a member in the church of the firstborns;
I have nothing to offer You;
Neither tithes nor firstfruits;
But to offer all my being, O my soul's beloved;
"My beloved is mine and I am his;
He feeds his flock among the lilies" (Songs 2: 16).

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CHAPTER 11

THE NEW DWELLERS IN JERUSALEM

The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt on the ruins of the old wall; but building walls with such few number of dwellers would benefit nothing, but would make the capital city, the center of worship, prone to destruction anew.

The majority of those who returned from Babylon dwelt in the cities around Jerusalem, because dwelling in Jerusalem was particularly difficult at the time, for the following reasons:

- a- Jerusalem was prone to attacks by the enemies
- b- The Gentiles found difficulty in dealing with those dwelling in Jerusalem, for being literal in practicing their religious doctrines.
- c- Moving to Jerusalem required rebuilding their houses, and to have jobs within the city, which needed much time, effort, and money.
- d- Dwelling in Jerusalem required abidance to specific religious and social rules, because of being close to the temple.
- e- Some feared of being committed to partake of standing guards on the city.
- f- Some so cherished the land they inherited from their fathers, to wish they could start to plant and use it by themselves anew.

Jerusalem embraced the following categories:

- a- The leaders from the governor to the prominent statesmen.
- b- The priests, the Levites, and the workers in the temple, like the Nethinims and the descendants of Solomon's servants.
- c- Those who were chosen by lot to dwell in it
- d- Those who willingly volunteered to dwell in Jerusalem

1- Choosing the new dwellers	1 - 2
2- The local leaders	3 – 24
a- A general proclamation	3– 4 (a)
b- Of the children of Judah	4– 6 (b)
c- Of the children of Benjamin	7– 9
d- Of the priests	10 - 14
e- Of the Levites	15 - 18
f- Of the workers in the temple	19 - 24
3- The locations assigned to the children of Judah	25 - 30
4- The locations assigned to the children of Benjamin	31 - 35
5- Levites moving from Judah to Benjamin	36

1 CHOOSING THE NEW DWELLERS:

Now the leaders of the people dwelt at Jerusalem; the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine-tenths were to dwell in other cities” (1)

The number of captives who returned was few compared to the number of the dwellers in Jerusalem in the days of the kings. Now, as the city looked sparsely inhabited, Nehemiah asked one out of ten from the outside of Jerusalem to move to dwell inside the wall; so that wide areas of the city would not remain empty.

The lot to choose those new dwellers was carried out by shaking little stones or

little pieces of wood (Proverbs 16: 33), then cast them on the ground (1 Chronicles 24: 31; Ezra 24: 6; Jonah 1: 7).

According to St. Augustine, although it is allowed by law to cast a lot to end disputes, yet that was due to the weakness of faith of man; for those who love God and their brethren do not need a lot.

“the holy city”. Jerusalem was rarely so called in the historical books, but only in the prophetic ones, like Isaiah 48: 2; 52: 1; Daniel 9: 24; Joel 3: 17.

“and the people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem” (2)

Beside those who were chosen by lot to dwell in Jerusalem. others willingly offered themselves to forsake their cities and villages to come and dwell in Jerusalem, motivated by a national responsibility. Those, the people blessed and commended for their patriotism. Choosing by joy and gladness to dwell in Jerusalem, they experienced what the psalmist says:

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord” (Psalm 23: 6)

“One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple” (Psalm 27: 4)

“Those who are planted in the house of the Lord, shall flourish in the courts of our God” (Psalm 92: 13)

“In the courts of the Lord’s house; in the midst of you, O Jerusalem” (Psalm 116: 19)

"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord'" (Psalm 122: 1)

"Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good" (Psalm 122: 9)

"Behold, Bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who by night stand in the sanctuary, and bless the Lord" (Psalm 134: 1)

- + ***"Those who are planted in the house of the Lord, shall flourish in the courts of our God"*** (Psalm 92: 13). We are planted somewhere, and flourish somewhere else. The apostle says: *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" (1 Corinthians 3: 6)*. I planted in the house of the Lord, namely in the church, not in her walls, but in her teachings; for the Lord says: *"The kingdom of God is within you"* (Luke 17: 21). All who are planted in the house of the Lord, and have their roots extend in her, will flourish there (in heaven).

The courts of our God are the eternal dwelling placesAlthough we may seem here as though in a house; yet we are immigrants to the kingdom of heaven. We are now at the beginning of the absolute perfection; We shall not become angels, but like angels. Don't ever despise that, O man!

(St. Jerome)

- + Our presence in the church, is a cry-out to the divine majesty, a demonstration of our submission to God, and our thanksgiving for the free grace He gave us. For even though we are the Father's enemies, adversaries, and opponents; He sent His only begotten Son from heaven,

to have His precious blood shed, and His gracious holy body delivered to redeem us. Reminding ourselves of those glorious passions, and doing those beloved memorials, under the veil of the bread and the wine, as the secret of the delivered holy body, and the shed pure blood; we partake of those unique graces, uniting in these divine glories.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ *"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, , let my right hand forget its skill. If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth – If I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy" (Psalm 137: 5-6).*

Notice here the great change; those who heard before that they would be driven out of the city, and did not care; Now pour curse upon themselves if they ever forget her.

By saying: *"Let my right hand forget its skills"?* he means to say: let me forget my authority and strength, let me become mute before the serious evils.

And by saying: *"If I do not excel Jerusalem above my chief joy"?* he means to say: I shall remember Jerusalem, not like anything else; but in my songs of praise.

(St. John Chrysostom)

2- THE LOCAL LEADERS:

a- A general proclamation: 3 – 4 (a)

“These are the heads of the province who dwelt in Jerusalem. (But in the cities of Judah everyone dwelt in his own possession in their cities—Israelites, priests,

Levites, Nethinim, and descendants of Solomon’s servants.)

(3)

The list that came in verses 3 – 19, could be compared to that included in 1 Chronicles 9: 2 – 21, concerning those who actually dwelt in Jerusalem after the return from Babylon; when many establishments were still not rebuilt; and when there was still no element of security; and the wall was still broken down. About half the names are mutual between the two lists: the one in the first book of the Chronicles, including only those who returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel; and the one here, with those who returned with Nehemiah, added to them.

“Also in Jerusalem dwelt some of the children of Judah and of the children of Benjamin” (4 a)

b- Of the children of Judah: 4 – 6 (b).

“The children of Judah: Athaiah the son of Uziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, of the children of Perez” (4 b)

⁵ *and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Col-Hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of Shilon” (5)*

The son of **Shilon**: does not refer to ‘Shiloh’ which belongs to the Northern kingdom more than to Judah. But it most probably means one of the descendants of Shelah, the third son of Judah

(Numbers 26: 20).

“All the sons of Perez who dwelt at Jerusalem were four hundred and sixty-eight valiant men” (6)

Valiant men; Mighty men of valor who served in the army
(Nehemiah 2: 9; 4: 2; 2 kings 15: 20; Ezra 8: 22).

c- Of the children of Benjamin: (7 – 9).

“And these are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joel, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiiah” (7)

“and after him Gabbai and Sallai, nine hundred and twenty-eight” (8)

“Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer, and Judah the son of Senuah^[a] was second over the city” (9)

Joel was a judge over the Benjamites in Jerusalem; and **Judah the son of Senuah** was his assistant. Each of them was probably responsible for a specific street or quarter where the Benjamites lived in

Jerusalem.

d- Of the priests: (10 – 14) .

“Of the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, and Jachin” (10)

“Seraiah the son of Hilkiah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, was the leader of the house of God” (11)

Seraiah, a descendant of the high priest whom Nebuchadnezzar killed (2 kings 25: 18 – 21)

The leader of the house of God; Namely a leader responsible for the civil or temporal issues in the temple; while the high priest was responsible for the spiritual issues and the ordinance of worship between

the priests and the Levites.

“Their brethren who did the work of the house were eight hundred and twenty-two; and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah,

the son of Pashhur, the son of Malchijah” (12)

“and his brethren, heads of the fathers’ houses, were two hundred and forty-two; and Amashai the son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer” (13)

“and their brethren, mighty men of valor, were one hundred and twenty-eight. Their overseer was Zabdiel the son of one of the great men” (14)

e- Of the Levites: (15 – 18)

“Also of the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni” (15)

“Shabbethai and Jozabad, of the heads of the Levites, had the oversight of the business outside of the house of God” (16)

This verse, and verses 20-21, 28-39, 32-35, are not found in the Septuagint version

The business outside the house of God, refers to the work of the judges outside the house of God (1 Chronicles 26: 29 and 2 Chronicles 19: 8-10));

“Mattaniah the son of Micha, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, the leader who began the thanksgiving with prayer; Bakbukiah, the second among his brethren; and Abda

the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun”
(17)

Asaph and Jeduthun were two of the three heads of the groups of singers in the temple (1 Chronicles 16: 42; 25: 1-2; Psalm 39: 50, 73-83)

“All the Levites in the holy city were two hundred and eighty-four” (18)

284 Levites was a small number compared to the number of the priests (1192)

f- Of the workers in the temple: (19 – 24).

“ Moreover the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon, and their brethren who kept the gates, were one hundred and seventy-two”
(19).

“And the rest of Israel, of the priests and Levites, were in all the cities of Judah, everyone in his inheritance” (20)

The **inheritance** here, refers to what they received from their ancestors of land, buildings, and the movable possessions like furniture, etc. which they got through the conquests as spoil (Genesis 31: 14;

Numbers 18: 21; 27: 7; 34: 2; 1 kings 21: 3-4). But the land of Canaan as a whole was considered as the inheritance of the lord; And even Israel itself was considered as an inheritance of the Lord

(Deuteronomy 4: 20; 9: 26, 29; 1 kngs 8: 51-53)

“ But the Nethinim dwelt in Ophel. And Ziha and Gishpa were over the Nethinim” (21).

“ Also the overseer of the Levites at Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micha, of the sons of Asaph, the singers in

charge of the service of the house of God” (22)

.” For it was the king’s command concerning them that a certain portion should be for the singers, a quota day by day” (23)

The **king** here is Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2: 8; Ezra 7: 20-24), who cared for their needs;.....**Concerning them**, namely concerning the Levites, particularly the singers;**a quota day by day**, namely their

daily expenses together with the gatekeepers, which were also covered by the people (Nehemiah 12: 47)

“ Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the children of Zerah the son of Judah, was the king’s deputy^[a] in all matters concerning the people” (24)

Pethahiah was the one responsible for the Jewish affairs in the court of the king in Shushan the capital of Persia

According to some, king Artaxerxes set some Jewish singers to work in the king's palace in Persia; and when they returned to Jerusalem, he gave his command to give them the salaries they used to have.

In the book of Ezra, we saw how king Darius ordered Tattai, governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and their companions to pay, at the king's expense, whatever was needed – young bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the request of the priests who are in Jerusalem – let it be given them day by day without fail. That they may offer sacrifices of sweet aroma to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons (Ezra 10: 6-10)

3- THE LOCATIONS ASSIGNED TO THE CHILDREN OF JUDAH

The locations mentioned here, are the villages with their fields where the children of Judah dwelt; most of them mentioned in Joshua 15: 13-63.

“And as for the villages with their fields, some of the children of Judah dwelt in Kirjath Arba and its villages, Dibon and its villages, Jekabzeel and its villages” (25)

The list mentioned in verses 25 – 30 is important, it conforms to the lists of the cities of Judah; and all these names also appear in Joshua 15, except for Debon, Jeshua, and Meconah; even though the list lacks a number of cities found in the list of Ezra 2: 20-34, and that of Nehemiah 3.

Kiriath Arba, namely the village of the four Amalekites, the old name of the city of Hebron (Genesis 23: 2; Judges 1:20); an important city, 20 miles South of Jerusalem. **Hebron** is the traditional location of the burial place of Abraham, Sarah, and the rest of the fathers.

“in Jeshua, Moladah, Beth Pelet” (26)

“Hazar Shual, and Beersheba and its villages” (27)

Jeshua, Moladah, and Beth Pelet were all close to Beersheba (Joshua 15: 26), a city, 40 miles South-East of Jerusalem.

“in Ziklag and Meconah and its villages” (28)

Ziklag, a famous city given to king David by Achish (1 Samuel 27: 6); then taken over by the Amalekites (1 Samuel 30: 1)

“in En Rimmon, Zorah, Jarmuth” (29)

En Rimmon, Nine and a half miles North-East of Beersheba (Joshua 15: 32; 19: 7; 1 Chronicles 4: 32)

Zorah, the home town of Manoah, father of Samson (Judges 13: 2)

Jermuth, one of five Canaanite cities in the South

“Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages; in Lachish and its fields; in Azekah and its villages. They dwelt from Beersheba to the Valley of Hinnom” (30)

Zanoah, a village in the region of the lowland between Judah and the land of the Philistines (Joshua 15: 34). The inhabitants of this region repaired the Valley Gate (Nehemiah 3: 13)

Adullam, a city between Jerusalem and Lachish, In it David hid himself from the face of king Saul (1 Samuel 22: 1)

Lachish, A great city in Judah, midway between Jerusalem and Gaza. When the Assyrian Sennacherib failed to take over Jerusalem in the year 701 BC, he took Lachish instead; then Nebuchadnezzar took it over (Jeremiah 34)

The valley of Hinnom, South-East of Jerusalem.

4- THE LOCATIONS ASSIGNED TO THE CHILDREN OF BENJAMIN: .

“Also the children of Benjamin from Geba dwelt in Michmash, Aija, and Bethel, and their villages” (31)

Geba, About six miles North-East of Jerusalem (Joshua 18: 24; Ezra 2: 26; Nehemiah 7: 30); Was fortified by king Asa (1 Kings 15: 22)

Michmash, About seven miles North-East of Jerusalem (Ezra 2: 27; Nehemiah 7: 31). At a strategic location to cross over to the Valley of the Jordan, where king Saul and his son Jonathan fought against the Philistines (1 Samuel 13, 14).

Aija, an alternative name of Ai, about three miles South-East of Bethel (Joshua 7, 8).

Bethel, or (the house of God), at the extreme North of the cities of Benjamin; its inhabitants were not mentioned among those who built the walls of Jerusalem.

“in Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah (32)

Nob, North of the Mount of Olives

Ananiah, probably is Bethany, a city two miles East of Jerusalem.

“in Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim” (33)

“in Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat” (34)

“in Lod, Ono, and the Valley of Craftsmen” (35)

Valley of the craftsmen, Probably a wide Valley between Lod and Ono

6- LEVITES MOVE FROM JUDAH TO BENJAMIN:

“ Some of the Judean divisions of Levites were in Benjamin”

(36)

Some of the Levites who were in Judah turned to Benjamin. And there were groups of Levites in both tribes.

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 11

LET ME, O LORD, DWELL IN YOUR CITY FOREVER

- + By Your humility. You set Your kingdom in me, O my Creator;
I see You transfigured in Your splendor in my depths;
Out of me, You set a holy temple, where Your Holy Spirit dwells.

- + My depths cry out to You, and meditate in You;
When You dwell in me;
I shall be in Your bosom;
When shall I dwell in Your heavenly Jerusalem?
There, I do not need a wall to protect me
There, I shall need no storehouse of weapons;
For no enemy will dare fight against me.

- + Your Jerusalem is very wide;
There, You wish for all to dwell forever;
My heart's desire is for all mankind to enjoy it;

And that all would become the bride and the heavenly queen.
The subject of pleasure of all the heavenly hosts.

+ It has gates on all sides;
It includes all those who come from East, West, North, and South;
From all nations, peoples, and tongues.

+ Yes, Come O, Lord Jesus;
"Be lifted up, you everlasting gates" (Psalm 24: 7)
Let all the heavenly hosts exult for us coming with You;
God the Father will also rejoice in us;
Glory be to You, O Savior of all humanity.

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CHAPTER 12

THE LISTS OF PRIESTS AND THE FINAL CELEBRATION

It is difficult to tell exactly when the wall was dedicated. According to some it was dedicated by the end of the twelve years spent by Nehemiah as the Governor of Judah; while according to others it happened after few months from the time the building of the wall was completed.

The rite of the celebration of the dedication was done on three stages:

- a- Singing praise to God by two processions of singers
- b- Reading the law
- c- Separating the foreigners from the people of God

This chapter presents to us a list of the names of the high priests and the Levites who returned with Zerubbabel and Jeshua (9:1-9), even though it does not cover all them, but only those of prominent names who had an active role, and did their work faithfully and with courage, with the goal to exhort the generations to come to follow suit.

Another list (10-11) presents the line of the high priests from Jeshua to Jedaiah, who, according to Josephus the Jewish Historian, was the high priest when Alexander the Great invaded Persia in the year 333 BC.

This does not mean that the book was written at that late time, but those lists were added for the sake of completion.

Then comes a list of the priests at the time of Joiakim (12 – 21), and the Levites from the days of Eliashib until those of Darius the third (22 – 26). What came in verse 23 are taken from the records of the temple; while what came in verse 24 refer to 1 Chronicles 16: 4 – 6).

Going back to our story:

The completion of building the wall was followed successively by reading the law, renewal of the covenant; then the dedication of the wall. The Levites and the singers were brought forth from the surrounding villages (27 – 29); and the people and the wall were purified, probably by scattering the blood of a sacrifice on them.

Then two great processions moved, probably from the gate to the south-west from which Nehemiah came out some time before (2: 13 – 15): one procession led by Ezra (31 – 37), and another led by Nehemiah (39 – 39). In most of the route, the two processions were On the top of the wall; then they got together in the courts of the temple (40); where they offered sacrifices, and praised God (41 – 43).

That celebration happened only once, but the worship in the temple was to be done every day. Hence the people set some Levites to be responsible to fulfill the needs of the workers in the temple (44 – 46), through the commitment of the people to pay the tithes, and to designate and distribute the portions of the priests, the singers and the gatekeepers.

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|--|---------|
| 1- The priests and the Levites in the first return | 1 - 9 |
| 2- The high priests and the Levites since Joiakim | 10 - 26 |

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------|
| 3- Nehemiah dedicates the wall | 27 - 42 |
| 4- God is the secret of their joy | 43 – 47 |

1- THE PRIESTS AND THE LEVITES IN THE FIRST RETURN:

“Now these are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra” (1)

Shealtiel; Father of Zerubbabel, as it came here and in Ezra 3: 2, 8; Haggai 1: 1. While in 1 Chronicles he was mentioned as his uncle.

Jeshua; the high priest about the year 560 - 590 BC (See Ezra 2: 2; Nehemiah 7: 7; 12: 10, 26).

Seraiah; also called **Azariah** in 1 Chronicles 9: 11.

Ezra; **certainly** different than Ezra who returned 80 years later.

“Amariah, Malluch, Hattush” (2)

“Shechaniah, Rehum, Meremoth” (3)

“Iddo, Ginnethoi Abijah” (4)

“Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah” (5)

“Shemaiah, Joiarib, Jedaiah” (6)

“Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah, and Jedaiah” (7)

The succession of the twenty-four priestly houses, probably began in the days of king David; of which twenty-two were mentioned in verses 1 – 7

David set the priests in 24 groups (1 Chronicles 24: 8), each of which submits to the one before it. This system endured until the desolation of the temple by the Romans.

“Moreover the Levites were Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and Mattaniah who led the thanksgiving psalms, he and his brethren” (8)

The thanksgiving was the main role of the singers (Nehemiah 11: 17). The system of thanksgiving followed the ‘Antiphonal’ system; when two choirs, or two divisions of the choir, stand one facing the other (Ezra 3: 11)

“Also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brethren, stood across from them in their duties” (9).

2- THE HIGH PRIESTS AND THE LEVITES SINCE JOIAKIM:

Jeshua begot Joiakim, Joiakim begot Eliashib, Eliashib begot Joiada” (10)

“Joiada begot Jonathan, and Jonathan begot Jaddua” (11)

We are told by Josephus the Jewish Historian that Alexander the Great came against Jerusalem in a very great army to punish the Jews for their loyalty to

Darius king of Persia, but Joiada the high priest (Nehemiah 12: 11, 22), came out to encounter him, leading a procession of priests and Levites. Seeing them, Alexander was so impressed, on account of that he has previously seen the same scene in a vision, that he felt that it is something coming from God. When the high priest told him about the prophecy of the prophet Daniel, that a Greek King shall destroy the kingdom of Persia, which has been actually realized in the year 322 BC. Alexander the Great became a friend of the Jews, and dealt with them with unusual cordiality..... This reveals that the Jews have already known the Book , and understood from its prophecies that a Greek kingdom will follow that of Persia.

“Now in the days of Joiakim, the priests, the heads of the fathers’ houses were: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah”
(12)

“of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan” (13)

“of Melichu,^[b] Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph” (14)

“of Harim,^[d] Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai” (15)

“of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshulla” (16)

“of Abijah, Zichri; the son of Minjamin; of Moadiah, Piltai”
(17)

“of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan” (18)

“of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi” (19)

“of Sallai,^[h] Kallai; of Amok, Eber” (20)

“of Hilkiah, Hashabiah; and of Jedaiah, Nethanel” (21)

....

“ During the reign of Darius the Persian, a record was also kept of the Levites and priests who had been heads of their fathers’ houses in the days of Eliashib, Joiada,

Johanan, and Jaddua” (22)

Darius the Persians; Either Darius the second (423-404 BC), or Darius the third (335-331 BC), the king defeated by Alexander the Great..

“The sons of Levi, the heads of the fathers’ houses until the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib, were written in the book of the chronicles” (23)

Probably written in the official Chronicles kept in the temple, including diverse lists and records.

Compare the book of the Chronicles of the kings of Persia (Ezra 4: 15; Esther 2: 23; 6: 1; 10: 2); the book of the Chronicles of the kings of Israel, referred to 18 times in the first and the second books of the kings; and the book of the Chronicles of the kings of Judah, referred to 15 times in the first and the second books of the kings..

“And the heads of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers across from them, to praise and give thanks, group alternatin

with group, according to the command of David the man of God” (24)

.”Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, and Akkub were gatekeepers keeping the watch at the storerooms of the gates” (25)

.”These lived in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak,^[1] and in the days of Nehemiah the governor, and of Ezra the priest, the scribe”. (26)

3- NEHEMIAH DEDICATES THE WALL:

“Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both

with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps” (27)

King Solomon before that, dedicated the temple which he built (1 kings 8)

According to some this dedication by Nehemiah happened directly after the building of the wall was completed; while according to others, it happened after setting other new establishments in the city..

Levites were called from all their locations to partake of the dedication, on account of that it was not just meant to commend those who built it on their great performance and effort, but it bore many meanings among which were:

- a- To give thanks to the Lord who helped all to complete the work despite the persistent opposition of the enemies

- b- It was the wall of the city, essentially set upon the presence in its midst, of the unique temple of the Lord at that time in the whole world, to represent the divine presence.
- c- It was to be a holy religious and royal celebration

The cymbals; were used in the religious celebrations (2 Samuel 6: 15; 1 Chronicles 16: 42; 25: 1; 2 Chronicles 5: 12; 29: 25; Ezra 3: 10).

The stringed instruments were used as well (1 Samuel 10: 5; 2 Samuel 6: 5; 1 Chronicles 15: 16; 20: 28; Psalm 150: 3).

The harps; a stringed instrument with some difference in details.

“And the sons of the singers gathered together from the countryside around Jerusalem, from the villages of the Netophathites’ (28)

The Netophathites; from Netopha, a city close to Bethlehem.

“from the house of Gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth; for the singers had built themselves villages all around Jerusalem” (29)

The house of Gilgal; probably Gilgal close to Jericho (Joshua 4: 19-20); or Gilgal of Elijah (2 Kings 2: 1), 7 miles North of Bethel.

“Then the priests and Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, the gates, and the wall” (30)

The word “**purified**”, refers to the purification of a person who practiced a certain defilement, to prepare him for worship (Leviticus 22: 4-7). The goal of purification is to reveal the holiness of God, and the commitment to be clean from all sins

before the Lord (Leviticus 16: 30).The purification of the gates and walls, most probably refers to the removal of ruins, then to scatter holy water with the ashes of the burnt offering on them (Leviticus 19: 17). For the same way the priests and the Levites are purified to minister to the Holy God, the walls and the gates as, well, are purified; on account of that they are dedicated to serve the city of the Living Holy God. .

“So I brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall, and appointed two large thanksgiving choirs. One went to the right hand on the wall toward the Refuse Gate” (31)

Two great processions probably set forth from the region of the Valley Gate (2: 13, 15; 3: 13) in the middle of the western division of the wall: The first procession, led by Ezra (36) and Hoshaiiah (32), moved anticlockwise on the wall; and the second procession, led by Nehemiah moved clockwise.. The two processions encountered one other between the Prison Gate and the Water Gate; then entered the region of the temple (Psalm 48: 12-13).

“After them went Hoshaiiah and half of the leaders of Judah”
(32)

“and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam” (33)

Ezra here is different from Ezra the scribe (36). Every Choir included 7 priests who blew the trumpets; and Levites who played the other musical instruments.

“Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah” (34)

“and some of the priests’ sons with trumpets—Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Michaiah, the son of Zaccur,

the son of Asaph” (35)

Asaph is the founder of one of the three musical choirs (1 Chronicles 35: 1 2).

“and his brethren, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. Ezra the scribe went

before them” (36)

“By the Fountain Gate, in front of them, they went up the stairs of the City of David, on the stairway of the wall, beyond the house of David, as far as the Water Gate

eastward” (37)

The procession turned around the southern end of the walls, then turned northward to the eastward wall to the Water Gate.

.

“ The other thanksgiving choir went the opposite way, and I was behind them with half of the people on the wall, going past the Tower of the Ovens as far as the Broad Wall’ (38)

The second thanksgiving choir, led by Nehemiah walked in the opposite direction of that led by Ezra, namely, clockwise toward the North, around the north-west divisions of the wall.

“and above the Gate of Ephraim, above the Old Gate, above the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate; and they stopped

by the Gate of the Prison” (39).

He did not refer to the Gate of Ephraim in the third chapter, for it was in good shape and needed no repair.

“ So the two thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God, likewise I and the half of the rulers with me” (40)

“and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Minjamin, Michaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets” (41)

“also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. The singers sang loudly with Jezrahiah the director” (42).

“Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of

Jerusalem was heard afar off”.(43)

5- GOD IS THE SECRET OF THEIR JOY:

Everything around them was joyful:

- a- The assembly of both the religious and the civil leaders with one spirit
- b- The great care of all the priests and the Levites for the celebration
- c- All men, women, and children partook of the celebration.
- d- The walls were all set and rebuilt.
- e- Jerusalem was inhabited with more dwellers.
- f- There were two processions that included the elites to shout aloud with the spirit of gladness.
- g- Sacrifices were offered to the Lord.
- h- Thanksgiving was offered to God

Above many things that have shaken the souls of all, the author expressed by saying: *“For God made them rejoice with great joy”* (32). The secret of their joy was the divine presence, and His exalted work in their life.

- It was God who initiated the work in Nehemiah’s heart; and who consummated it to the end.
- It was God who granted them success, and put the opposition of the enemies to no avail
- It was God who granted them the spirit of unity to work together
- It was God who sanctified the city, the temple, and the wall.
- It was God who was the Leader of the hidden procession
- It was God who was the Wall of the true Jerusalem and its gates; For He protects His people, and brings them forth to His glories

+ He who looks inside himself to the Lord, and his soul is mixed with His light, will have his heart filled with joy.

(The spiritual elder)

- + The way the trees would not grow if they are not watered; so is the soul, if it does not receive the heavenly joy, it will not grow. nor ascend up high.It is only the souls that received the Spirit and the heavenly joy, that can soar up high; for to them the secrets of the kingdom of heaven are revealed, while still in the body; found the daring before God in everything; and had all her requests answered.

- + The soul always grows in this joy, is happy with it, ascends by it up to heaven; and, like the body, it has its spiritual food.

(St. Anthony the Great)

- + As the true joy for the soul is the Creator, it is befitting of man, who forsakes the Lord, and searches for joy inside himself, to remain in eternal sorrow.

(Pope Gregory the Great)

The secret of their joy was not just for rebuilding the wall; nor for the great processions, and the joyful musical choirs, as much as it was for God Himself *“who made them rejoice with great joy”* (43)

“And at the same time some were appointed over the rooms of the storehouse for the offerings, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the

portions specified by the Law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered” (44)

“Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son” (45)

.”For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to Go” (46)

.”In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, a portion for each day. They also consecrated holy

things for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated them for the children of Aaron” (47)

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 12

O LORD, YOU ARE THE SECRET OF MY JOY

+ O My Lord, You are the beginning and the end;

You started the work with Nehemiah, walked with him, and reached with him to the perfection of success;

Being his Companion;

The hosts of darkness could not destroy him;

You gave him grace before both the rich and the poor;

O my God, You granted Your people the spirit of unity;

You were present among them;

Working by and in them to the account of Your kingdom.

+ You were the Leader, the Overseer, and the hidden Sanctifier;

You became for them a Wall of fire to protect them;

And the Door to enjoy entering to You.

+ O my God, You are the secret of my joy;

All the walls of the world will eventually be destroyed;

And all the doors of the temporal life will eventually close;

But You are the Wall of my life;

To protect me against the strikes of the enemy;

And surround me with Your grace;

And perpetually renew my depths.

+ You are my perpetual joy;

By You I challenge death;

By You I reach the bosom of Your Father;

By You I enjoy eternity;

Glory be to You, O Fountain of every heavenly joy.

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CHAPTER 13

SANCTIFICATION AND PURIFICATION

In building the wall of Jerusalem, what moved Nehemiah's heart was the flaring zeal on the glory of God; He was preoccupied, not with building the wall itself, but because it is the wall of the city of God, which it is befitting to be holy for the Lord, and surrounded by a dedicated wall.

Perceiving that the wall would be of no value without a people, holy for the Lord, the book was ended by Nehemiah's care to undergo a movement of purification on the level of the leaders, whatever was their position, and the people without any partiality to the account of the kingdom of heaven.

There is difference of opinion as to how long Nehemiah stayed in the Persian royal court before asking the king to allow him to return to Jerusalem; but in that, when he did return, he found four serious challenges, which he put in his heart to solve without hesitation:

- a- An alliance between Eliashib the high priest and Tobiah the Ammonite (4), one of the prominent opponents of rebuilding the wall, probably through marital relationship, he also had with Sanballat (28).
- b- The people stopped forgot their pledge to pay the tithes and the offerings (Malachi 3: 8-12); and the Levites were scattered to work in their lands and fields (10-13)
- c- The people broke the Sabbath; brought the merchandise to prepare them to be sold; even though they did not sell them in the Sabbath.

- d- The people resumed the mixed marriages with pagan wives (Malachi 2: 11-18); and their children were raised unable to talk Hebrew, and could not therefore read the Holy Book (23-24)

With his soul embittered to see the corruption that dwelt upon his people during his absence, Nehemiah had to deal with violence with the transgressors, among whom was the grandson of the high priest; but what he did was not in vain, for God remembered him for good (30-31).

- 1- The high priest gave a large room in the temple to Tobiah the Ammonite
1 - 9
- 2- Giving the tithes to the Levites
10 - 14
- 3- Keeping the Sabbath
15 - 22
- 4- Sending away the pagan wives
23 – 31

**1- THE HIGH PRIEST GAVE A LARGE ROOM IN THE TEMPLE TO
TOBIAH THE AMMONITE:**

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

We find that also in Deuteronomy 23: 3-5.

“because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing” (2)

Reading the Holy Book in the secret place will help the soul to perceive its weakness, kindle her to long toward,, and to enjoy the experience of the heavenly life. But reading it publicly, has its effect upon the people as a whole. Here we see the people long for the complete obedience of the Word of God. Sins, almost collective, were revealed, that were counted as nets and snares, set by the enemy to destroy the people as a whole.

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

It is befitting of us to discern between God’s love for all mankind; calling all nations to salvation (Isaiah 42: 6), and sending away the evildoers (Hosea 7: 8), the opponents of the truth, and those who cause offense to the believers.

.....By “the mixed multitude”, he most probably means the Moabites and the ammonites, about whom the law clearly said not to be allowed to enter into the temple; on account of that they bore great animosity against the children of Israel. This does not imply racial discrimination, because God allows foreigners to offer sacrifices (Numbers 15: 15, 16).

“Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, was allied with Tobiah” (4)

Entering into familial relationships and friendships with pagans, had their serious consequences even upon the high priest, who despised the divine sanctuaries and defiled the house of God..

“And he had prepared for him a large room, where previously they had stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, the tithes of grain, the new wine and oil, which

were commanded to be given to the Levites and singers and gatekeepers, and the offerings for the priests” (5)

“But during all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Then after certain days I obtained leave from the king” (6)

If Nehemiah has been in Jerusalem, Eliashib the high priest would not dare to commit such an abdominal thing.

“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” (7)

Nehemiah had to return to Babylon in the year 433 BC, namely after 12 years of being in Jerusalem, either because he has previously set that date when he was allowed by the king to leave; or because the king called him back to discuss the situation so far with him.

“And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room” (8)

Firmly, Nehemiah drove out Tobiah the Ammonite from the room given to him by Eliashib the high priest, and threw all his household goods out of the room. The same thing the Lord Christ did when “He went into the temple and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of those who sold doves; for they made the house of God a den of thieves (Matthew 21: 12, 13).

We should be like Nehemiah, firm with ourselves, and drive away from the temple of the Lord inside us, all the things that stir up the evil desires. It is befitting of us to return the holy vessels to the house of the Lord.

“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” (9)

- + Every day, Jesus enters into His Father’s temple, and drives away from His church in the whole world, bishops, priests, deacons, and people, charging them with the same accusation, namely “that *they sell and buy*”. And what I say about the churches, everyone should apply to his own soul; for the apostle says: “*You are the temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwells in you*” (). Let the house of our heart be free of every trade, of sellers and buyers; and of every desire to get gifts; lest the Lord would come stirred up, and purify His temple with His whip; to turn the den of thieves back to a house of prayers.

(St. Jerome)

2 GIVING THE TITHES TO THE LEVITES:

"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" (10)

If it was befitting of the ministers of God to forsake the things of the world; It was also the duty of the believers, as a whole, to support the church to cover the expenses of her ministers and the needs of the ministry.

Here, because the people stopped supporting the Levites, they had to go back to their lands to sustain their families, at the expense of their commitments to the ministry of the temple. On another aspect, the people probably stopped paying to the temple, when they saw that the Levites and the singers had their own lands; when God's commanded them to have the Lord as their portion.

"So I contended with the rulers, and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" (11)

Nehemiah put the blame first on the rulers; for they were slothful toward the house of the Lord, and those who worked in it.

*"And I gathered them together and set them in their place.
¹² Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse" (12)*

*“And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouse
Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites,
Pedaiah; and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur,

the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and
their task was to distribute to their brethren” (13)*

Putting the blame first on the rulers and the rest of the people, Nehemiah also took a firm stand against the Levites themselves, to make them return to their befitting mission, namely to work in the house of the Lord, and not in the fields..... But before issuing orders, he elaborately studied every problem to arrive at practical solutions to them..

*“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!” (14)*

3- KEEPING 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,*

*which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And
I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions”
(15)*

The believers were committed to keep the Sabbath from sunset of Friday to sunset of Saturday; according to the words of God, saying: *"Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem, nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers"* (Jeremiah 17: 21, 22).

"Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem" (16).

"Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day?" (17)

"Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath" (18)

"So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till

after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day" (19)

"Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice" (20).

“Then I warned them, and said to them, “Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!” From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath” (21)

Intending to uproot the sin before it sends stem and carry fruits, Nehemiah did not wait until the time the merchants started to sell their goods, but warned them while spending the night around the wall..It is good for man not to be slothful with sin as it starts to set forth, even in the form of a hidden thought, lest it may turn into action, and with time into a habit.Let us drive away those who spend the night beside the wall, before they enter into the city, and defile the day of the Lord.

“And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day Remember me, O my God,

concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy” (22)

Nehemiah used to follow up every act of reform by a prayer to God, counting what is achieved, as not by his own effort, but through the greatness of God's mercy, and the riches of His exalted grace..

+ How can we consummate God's commandment, even with difficulty, without His help; for *“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it”* (Psalm 127: 1)

+ Why do you depend upon yourself and fall?Cast yourself on His arms! Do not fear, He will never let you slide;Throw yourself with surety, He will pick you up and heel you.

(St. Augustine)

+ The divine grace that edifies the world, is like a compassionate mother, who cares for her child. A mother would never forsake her child; and the child in his turn thinks that there is no other woman in the whole world beside the one who suckles him.

+ None of God's gifts to humanity is a pay back for a debt, but all are through grace.

(The scholar Origen)

4- SENDING AWAY THE PAGAN WIVES:

"In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab" (23)

."And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people" (24)

Because of the important role of the mother, the children of the pagan wives, spoke the language of Ashdod, and not the Jewish tongue. If that concerns the words they utter, how much more would be the inner tongues or thoughts of the children raised by the Ashdodite, Ammonite, and the Moabite mothers; beside the foreign servants and slaves who came with those women!.

“So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters as wives

to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves” (25)

Pulling out one’s hair from the root, was a sign of feeling great sorrow, and being done on someone, else was a kind of punishment; as the old Greeks used to punish the adulterer by pulling out the hair of his or her heads, then covering the head with hot ashes.

“Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel” (26)

. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin” (26)

“Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?” (27)

Here, Nehemiah used Solomon, one of the greatest kings of Israel, as a serious example of the perversion to the pagan worship, as a result of his marriage to pagan Gentile wives; which brought a great calamity on the whole kingdom..

“And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I drove him from me” (28).

“Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites” (29).

“Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service, and to bringing the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times” (30).

“Remember me, O my God, for good!” (31)

Here, as well, Nehemiah ended the book by this phrase, he used to repeat, to show that his eyes are concentrated on God; that all what he did was actually God's own work, and by His divine support; and that he does not seek to be commended by anyone, but only God's pleasure.

AN INSPIRATION FROM NEHEMIAH 13

YOUR HOLY SPIRIT, O LORD, PERPETUALLY SANCTIFIES ME

- + I confess to You, O my Savior, my sins and my weaknesses;
I long to dedicate my whole life for You;
You have redeemed me by Your precious blood;
You sealed me with Your Holy Spirit;
You counted me as Your possession.

- + With slothfulness, Eliahib the high priest delivered Your sanctuaries to Tobiah, an opponent of Your work;

For the sake of familial relationship or friendship, he defiled Your sanctuaries;

I confess to You, O Lord, my own slothfulness;
For I often forsook my mind to the devil to play with;
And my heart as a playing field for corruption;
Who will purify my works, but You?
Who has the authority to keep my heart and mind but You?
To sanctify and purify me?
Here I am within Your hands.

- + You came down from heaven for my sake;
You presented to me Your exalted grace;

But in foolishness, my heart was attracted by the ashes of the world;
Lift me up, O Lord, from the trash;
Grant me the wings of a dove;
To fly away and come to be with You in heaven;
To sell everything I own and acquire You, O the high-priced Pearl.

+ How foolish I am!In Your compassion, You intend to set out of my life a holy Sabbath;

To find comfort in my depths, and to let me find comfort in You;
For You are my Sabbath, feast, and resurrection;
You are my comfort, happiness, and glory;
Let me pass my whole life as an enjoyable journey with You;
Let me sing Your praise, and meditate in Your commandments;
For I find my pleasure and sweetness in Your love.

+ Let me unite with You, O amazing in Your Holiness!

Let me be attached to You, and reject everything foreign from You;
For You are the Groom of my soul;
Come, O Lord Jesus;
For I have already waited long for Your coming

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CONTENTS

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

A PREFACE: GOD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

AN INTRODUCTION: A historical background; The author of the book; Who is Nehemiah? Nehemiah the leader; Nehemiah's features; A historical parade of events; The person of Nehemiah: 1-The unity of life 2-Faithfulness 3-A man of action 4-He challenged the devil, and was not confused by his opposition 5-He believed in the collective work 6- He was a man of decency and order 8-Nehemiah as a symbol of the Lord Christ – the Minister.

THE DIVISIONS OF THE BOOK: (1) Building the wall
(2) Building the people:

Lessons from the book of Nehemiah; Features of Nehemiah's prayer; A book of remembrance; Prosperity is a divine gift; The two journeys to freedom.

-- An inspiration from the book of Nehemiah: Carry me, O Lord, to the location of ministry

WHAT WAS SAID ABOUT THE WALL OF JERUSALEM IN THE HOLY BOOK:.

Jerusalem, the beloved bride (Isaiah 62: 5-6); "*The sons of the foreigners shall build your walls*" (Isaiah 60: 10); "*I have inscribed your walls on the palms of my hand; you are continually before me*" (Isaiah 49: 16 LXX); Even to these, I will give in My house, and within the walls, a place and a name" (Isaiah 56: 5); Christ is the wall of our Jerusalem; The

waters turn into a wall; *"I have made you bronze walls against the whole land"; The wall of privilege; The wall of the commandments; The wall of the higher Jerusalem; The walls of the enemy.*

THE FIRST SECTION

BUILDING THE WALL

CHAPTER 1: MEHEMIAH'S CARE FOR JERUSALEM:

Nehemiah carries the burdens of his brethren; A sitting with God;
Nehemiah's prayer

-- An inspiration from chapter 1: Lift my heart up to You; and let it be wide with love for all mankind.

CHAPTER 2: "COME AND LET US BUILD"

Nehemiah, a man of prayer and work; Nehemiah sets forth to work;
Nehemiah's arrow prayer; Nehemiah's work plan; Nehemiah's practical execution of his plan; The opposition of the enemy;
Nehemiah explores the situation; Nehemiah calls for collective work; The enemies laughed at the Jews and despised them.:

-- In inspiration from chapter 2: "Here I am, send me"

CHAPTER 3: DIVISION OF LABOR AND SETTING THE GATES:

The sheep Gate; The Fish Gate; The Old Gate; The Valley Gate;
The Refuse Gate; The fountain Gate; The Water Gate; The Horse Gate;
The East Gate; The Nethinim (or the Miphcad) Gate.

-- An inspiration from chapter 3: You, O Lord, wish all to be leaders who work by You

Chapter 4: OPPOSITION OUTSIDE AND INSIDE:

Sanballat and Tobiah mock the Jews; Nehemiah cries out to God;
The Jews keep on working; The hosts of evil join forces;; Praying
and setting watch; The enemy provoke the spirit of failure; Nehemiah
exhorts the sorit of strength; Nehemiah, the laborer.

-- An inspiration from chapter 4: Liberate, me, O Lord, from the spirit of
anger.

CHAPTER 5: INNER TROUBLES:

The complaints of the poor; The practical action of Nehemiah;
Nehemiah as a practical role model.

-- An inspiration from chapter 5: Save me from my inner troubles, O
Lord.

CHAPTER 6: IT IS TIME FOR WORK AND NOT FOR DEBATE:

Plots against Nehemiah; Completion of rebuilding the wall, and the
enemies' reaction

-- An inspiration from chapter 6: Sanctify, O Lord, every second of my
life

CHAPTER 7: An Elaborate (OR Tough) WATCH:

An elaborate (or tough) and an exultant watch over the wall; A
census of the leaders and the people

-- An inspiration from chapter 7: Be my Guardian, O Lord.

THE SECOND SECTION

BUILDING THE PEOPLE

CHAPTER 8: CARE FOR THE LAW OF GOD:

The people demand reading the Holy Book; A collective assembly to proclaim the Holy Book; A celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacles.

-- An inspiration from chapter 8: Who will build the walls of my soul, but You, O Lord?

CHAPTER 9: FASTING< REPENTANCE, AND SINGING PRAISE TO GOD:

A repentance and a return to God; A call to praise God; A collective praise of God; A promise to Abraham; The exodus of the children of Israel; Crossing over the Red Sea; The divine care in the wilderness; Giving the law; God's care for the people's needs; The people's rebellion; God's multitude of mercies; In the promised land; A confession of sins; A renewal of the covenant

-- An inspiration from chapter 9: Let me return to You, O Great in mercies

CHAPTER 10: RENEWAL OF THE COVENANT:

A list of those who put their seals on the covenant; The conditions of the covenant.

-- An inspiration from chapter 10: Every morning, O Lord, we renew the covenant with You.

Chapter 11: THE NEW DWELLERS IN JERUSALEM:

Choosing the new dwellers; The local leaders: (A general proclamation; Of the children of Judah; Of the children of Benjamin; Of the priests; Of the Levites; Of the workers in the temple); The locations assigned to the children of Judah; The locations assigned to the children of Benjamin; Levites move from Judah to Benjamin.

-- An inspiration from chapter 11: Let me, O Lord, dwell in Your city forever

CHAPTER 12: THE LISTS OF PRIEST, AND THE FINAL CELEBRATION:

The priests and the Levites in the first return; The high priests and the Levites since Joakim; Nehemiah dedicates the wall; God is the secret of their joy.

-- An inspiration from chapter 12: O Lord, You are the secret of my joy.

CHAPTER 13: SANCTIFICATION AND PURIFICATION:

The high priest gave a large room in the temple to Tobiah the Ammonite; Giving the tithes to the Levites; Keeping the Sabbath; Sending the pagan wives away;

-- An inspiration from chapter 13: Your Holy Spirit, O Lord, perpetually sanctifies me.

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END OF BOOK