

Nehemiah

Return to Me

Teaching Series by Pastor Trey Graham

They [visitors] said to me, “The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.” Nehemiah 1:3

When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was **fasting** and **praying** before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 1:4

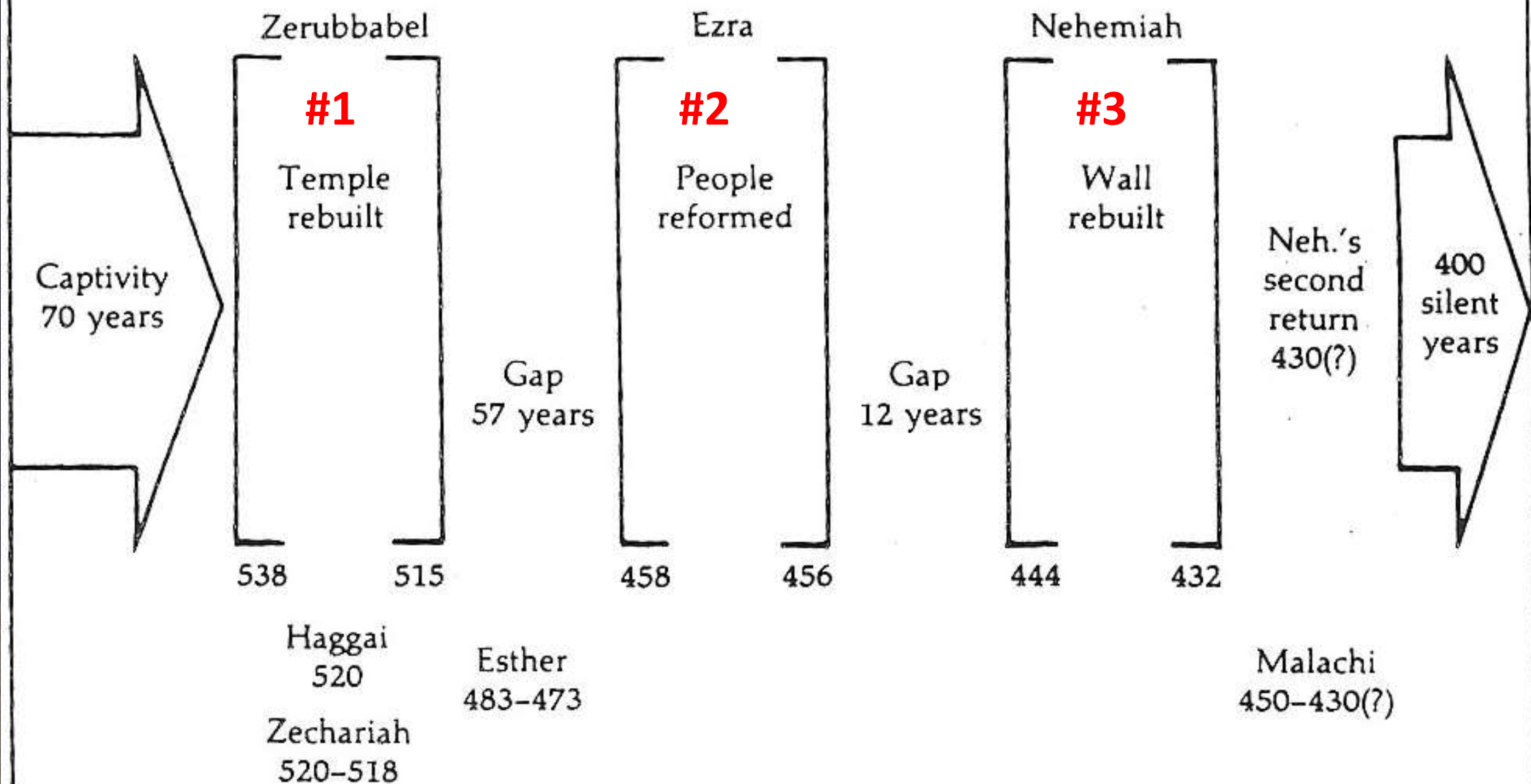
Nehemiah prayed... “Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you **return to Me** and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.’”

Nehemiah 1:8-9

Now I was the cupbearer to the king. Nehemiah 1:11b

- An officer of high rank with Egyptian, Persian, Assyrian, and Jewish monarchs. The cupbearer of the king of Egypt is mentioned in connection with Joseph's history (Gen. 40:1–21; 41:9). Rabshakeh was cupbearer in the Assyrian court (2 Kings 18:17). Nehemiah filled this office to the king of Persia (Neh. 1:11). We read also of Solomon's cup-bearers (1 Kings 10:5; 2 Chr. 9:4). – Easton's Bible Dictionary
- A confidant in a royal entourage (1 Kings 10:5). The cupbearer could exercise influence on a king's policies (Neh. 1:11-2:8). The first servant of the Pharaoh imprisoned with Joseph had held the Pharaoh's cup 'in my hand ...' (Gen. 40:11), suggesting that the cupbearer carried responsibility for nurturing (giving food and drink to) those in his care. – Harper's Bible Dictionary
- An office of trust; tasting the king's wine and food, the cupbearer stood between the king and death. That Nehemiah, a Jew and a captive, served this Gentile king in such a strategic capacity was an unusual credit and honor to this man of strong character.

The Three Returns from Exile



So **the wall was completed** on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, **in fifty-two days**. Nehemiah 6:15

TIMELINE

- *Now it happened in the month **Chislev** [**late November – early December**], in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol, that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came ... Nehemiah 1:1a
- *And it came about in the month **Nisan** [**March/April**], in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him... Nehemiah 2:1a
- *Nehemiah's trip to Jerusalem took 2-3 months (**April or May to June or July**)
- *Construction work must have begun on 3rd day of **Av** [**late July**]
- *Wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month **Elul** [**late September**], 10 months after Nehemiah learned of the problem & after 2 months of work

Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people [who did not live in Jerusalem] cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the **holy city** [הַקֹּדֶשׁ עִיר Ir HaKodesh], while nine-tenths remained in the other cities. Nehemiah 11:1

Now at the dedication [חֲנֻכָּהּ hanukkah] of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication [חֲנֻכָּהּ hanukkah] with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving [תּוֹדָה todah] and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps and lyres. Nehemiah 12:27

and on that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy [שִׂמְחָה simchah] of Jerusalem was heard from afar. Nehemiah 12:43

*Do non-believers see the joy of believers today?

Nehemiah Chapter 13

*Wall reconstruction in chapter 6 was completed about 11-12 years before chapter 13.

Have you
ever been
on the
spiritual
roller
coaster?



On that day **they read aloud from the book of Moses** in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it [Deuteronomy 23] that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. So when they heard the law [תּוֹרָה torah], they excluded all foreigners from Israel. Nehemiah 13:1-3

“No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. Nevertheless, the Lord your God was not willing to listen to Balaam, but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the Lord your God loves you. You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days.” Deuteronomy 23:3-6

Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to [his son-in-law] Tobiah [the Ammonite], had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. Nehemiah 13:4-5

* Eliashib had been involved in restoring the walls (see Nehemiah 3:1), but now he had allowed an opponent to reside inside the temple complex!

But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon [and Persia] I had gone to the king.

Nehemiah 13:6a

Chronology of the Postexilic Period

Persian Kings	Dates of Their Reigns	Biblical Events			
Cyrus	559–530 B.C.	Edict of Cyrus for the return <i>First return</i> of 49,897 exiles, under Zerubbabel (to build the temple) The altar and temple foundation built	<i>Third return</i> of exiles, under Nehemiah (to build the walls of Jerusalem)	Book of Nehemiah	444
			Nehemiah's second return	Nehemiah 13:6	ca. 430
Cambyses	530–522				
Smerdis	522				
Darius I	521–486	Haggai prophesied	Book of Haggai	520	
		Zechariah prophesied	Book of Zechariah	520–518	
		The temple completed	Ezra 5–6	515	
Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	485–465	Accusation against Judah	Ezra 4:6	486	
		Esther became queen	Esther 2:17	479	
Artaxerxes I (Artashasta)	464–424	Artaxerxes stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem	Ezra 4:7–23	ca. 464–458	
		<i>Second return</i> of 4,000–5,000 exiles, under Ezra (to beautify the temple and reform the people)	Ezra 7–10	458	
		<i>Third return</i> of exiles, under Nehemiah (to build the walls of Jerusalem)	Book of Nehemiah	444	
		Nehemiah's second return	Nehemiah 13:6	ca. 430	
		Malachi prophesied	Book of Malachi	450–430 (?)	

So the king said to me, “Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.” Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, “Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city [Jerusalem], the place of my fathers’ tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?” Nehemiah 2:2-3

*Seventy-one years before (in 515 BC), the Temple had been rebuilt. The year was now 444 BC; yet the city itself still needed much rebuilding. – Bible Knowledge Commentary

Then the king said to me, “What would you request?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. I said to the king, “If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it.” Nehemiah 2:4-5

*Nehemiah spent 12 years in Jerusalem on his assignment from the king (444-432 BC) and then returned to the Persian capital of Susa. *How long had he been back in Susa? Maybe one or two years.

*Wall reconstruction was completed about 11-12 years before chapter 13.

After some time, however, I asked leave from the king, and I came to Jerusalem [in approx. 430 BC] and learned about the evil that [priest] Eliashib had done for [his son-in-law] Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God [Temple]. It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense. Nehemiah 13:6b-9

I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field. So I reprimanded the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts. Nehemiah 13:10-11

- Nehemiah's task pertains to why Tobiah was able to occupy one of the temple storerooms. They were empty because the people had failed in their commitment to bring their tithes and offerings to the Levites. – Bible Knowledge Commentary
- The Levites, i.e., the assistants of the priests, and the singers were accustomed to receive during the time of their ministry their daily portions of the tenths and first-fruits (Neh. 12:47). When then these offerings were discontinued, they were obliged to seek their maintenance from the fields of the towns and villages in which they dwelt (Neh. 12:28), and to forsake the service of the house of God. – Commentary on the Old Testament

Commitments in the written prayer (Neh. 10)

- Everyone can and should participate, no matter their job
- Walk in God's law (torah)
- Keep God's commandments
- Raise children to know, love and serve God
- Prioritize time with God over business ventures
- Show compassion to others in need
- Give faithfully to God's house (Temple)
- Celebrate God's appointed holy days
- Give back to God from what He has given them

At about the same time as Nehemiah lived...

“Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! **Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse**, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the Lord of hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.” Malachi 3:8-10

All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine and oil into the storehouses. In charge of the storehouses I appointed Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and in addition to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered reliable, and it was their task to distribute to their kinsmen. Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services. Nehemiah 13:12-14

In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food. Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. Nehemiah 13:15-16

Commitments in the written prayer (Neh. 10)

- Everyone can and should participate, no matter their job
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- Raise children to know, love and serve God
- **Prioritize time with God over business ventures**
- Show compassion to others in need
- Give faithfully to God's house (Temple)
- Celebrate God's appointed holy days
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Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath.” Nehemiah 13:17-18

About 200 years earlier, the prophet wrote...

Thus says the Lord, "Take heed for yourselves, and do not carry any load on the sabbath day or bring anything in through the gates of Jerusalem. You shall not bring a load out of your houses on the sabbath day nor do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers."

Jeremiah 17:21-22

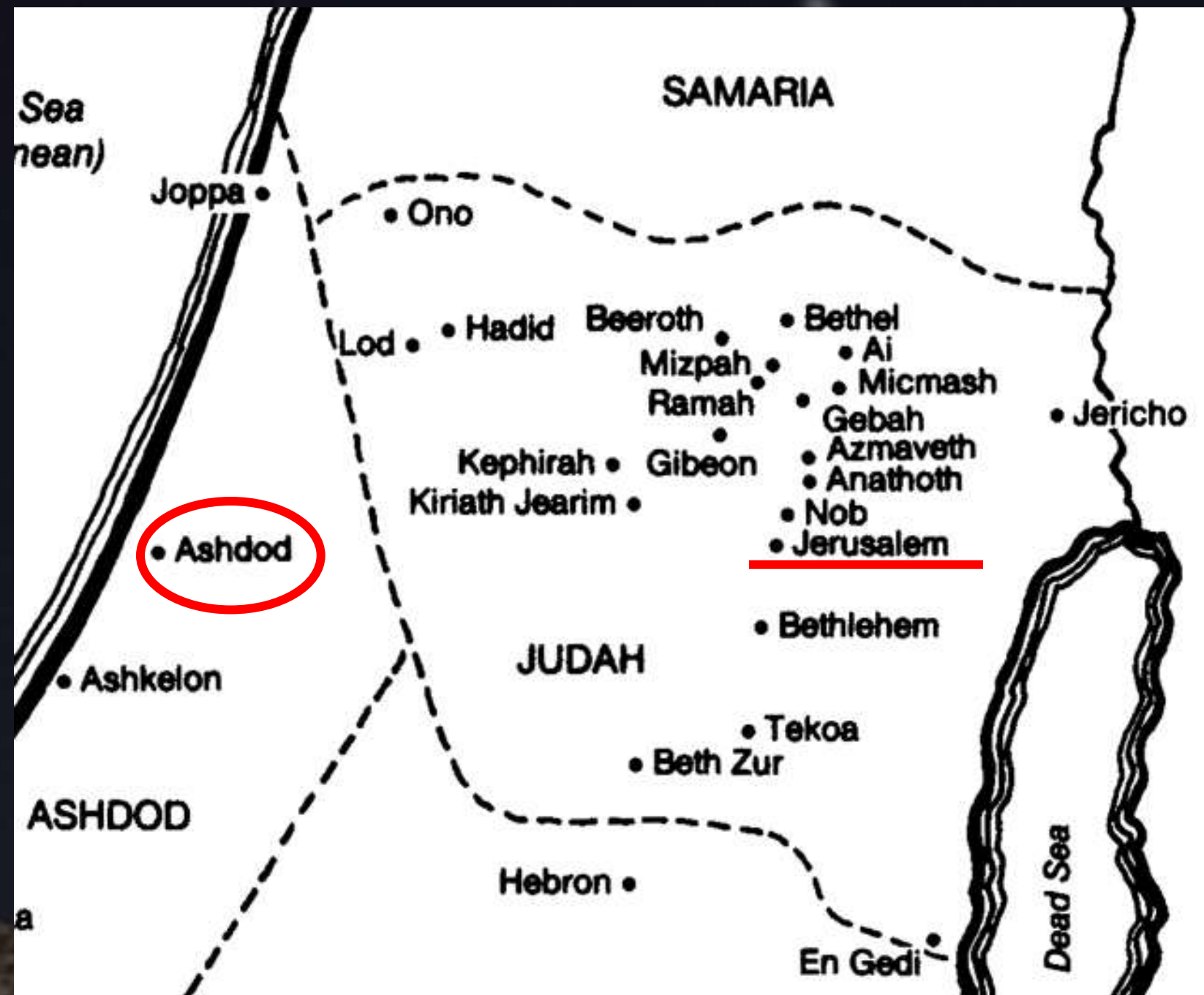
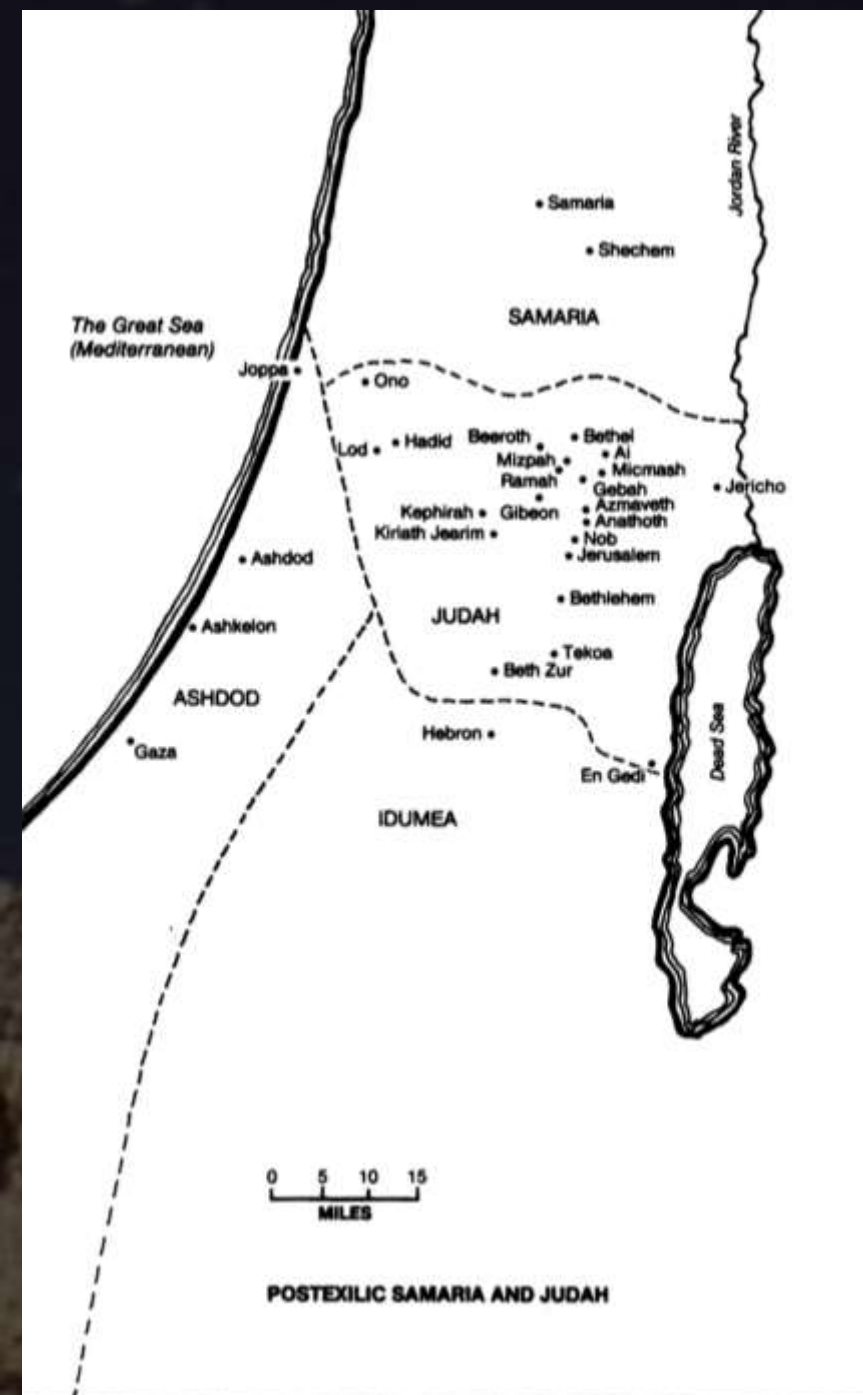
It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates so that no load would enter on the sabbath day. Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. Nehemiah 13:19-20

Then I warned them and said to them, “Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you.” From that time on they did not come on the sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness [חֶסֶד chesed].

Nehemiah 13:21-22

In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod [a Philistine city], Ammon and Moab. As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah [Hebrew], but the language of his own people.

Nehemiah 13:23-24



[About 1,000 years earlier...] “Watch yourself that you **make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going**, or it will become a snare in your midst. But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim—for you shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God— otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice, and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods.” Exodus 34:12-16

So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair [beard?], and made them swear by God, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.” Nehemiah 13:25

“Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin. Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?” Nehemiah 13:26-27

[About 500 years earlier...] Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, “You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.” Solomon held fast to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done. 1 Kings 11:1-6

Even one of the [priest] sons of [high priest]
Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was
a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite
[therefore a Jewish priest married a non-
Israelite], so I drove him away from me.

Remember them, O my God, because they
have defiled the priesthood and the covenant
of the priesthood and the Levites.

Nehemiah 13:28-29

This book underscores the importance of physical protection for God's people in Jerusalem but, more importantly, it stresses the need for His people to obey His Word, not giving in to sin through neglect, compromise, or outright disobedience.

Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits.

Nehemiah 13:30-31a

*What should believers do after repentance?

*Begin to honor God and walk in obedience.

**What can we learn from
the life and ministry of
Nehemiah?**

Lessons for Disciples from the Book of Nehemiah

1. Nehemiah inspected the wall and prepared his strategy prior to announcing his plans. We learn from this to keep our own counsel (or with a small group of advisors) until our plans are complete. Only then should we share them with the larger group. If we share half-baked plans, it gives our opposition all they need to stop us (Nehemiah 2:11-16).
2. In any great God-inspired work we can expect opposition. Having enemies doesn't mean you're out of God's will; rather, it may even be an indication that you *have* heard from God.
3. Nehemiah involved people in the project who would be motivated by their own self-interest. We need to build coalitions of people to implement projects. This often takes time, but is essential to success (Nehemiah 3).

Lessons for Disciples from the Book of Nehemiah

4. In any God-inspired project we can expect some people in our organizations to be opposed or to refuse to help (Nehemiah 3:5). Don't wait to act until you have complete unanimity; find God's will and then go forward.
5. Prayer should be combined with action, whenever possible. Taking God-guided action doesn't mean you lack faith in God's ability to answer prayer. Rather, it is a willingness to allow God to use you as part of the answer (Nehemiah 4:9).
6. In any great God-inspired project we can expect discouragement and apprehension among our workers, and will need to deal with it (Nehemiah 4:10-15).

Lessons for Disciples from the Book of Nehemiah

7. Leaders must be willing to adapt their original plans to meet unforeseen circumstances (Nehemiah 4:16-18). German military strategist Helmuth von Moltke (1800-1891) famously said, "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy."
8. Every great God-inspired work needs to take into account security (Nehemiah 4:16-21). Since we are in a spiritual battle, this means intercessory prayer teams.
9. Rebuilding Jerusalem's defenses so the enemy cannot control us is analogous to us building up spiritual defenses against Satan's temptations, so he cannot keep us weak (Ephesians 6:10-13).

Lessons for Disciples from the Book of Nehemiah

10. God opposes anything that oppresses the poor -- including high interest rates and injustice. We must resist the temptation to greed (unjust gain) at the expense of others (Nehemiah 5:1-18). The underlying issues are injustice and a lack of compassion.
11. Nehemiah used public shaming to force greedy lenders to change their ways (Nehemiah 5:7-12).
12. Nehemiah set an example by foregoing his rights to financial support (Nehemiah 5:14-19), just as the Apostle Paul did centuries later (1 Corinthians 9:3-23). Leaders should set an example of self-sacrifice.

Remember me, O my God, for
good. Nehemiah 13:31b

- *Nehemiah prays this for the 4th time in this chapter.
- *Do we pray DURING and AFTER struggles?
- *Do we have hearts of repentance?
- *Are we walking in obedience?

Nehemiah

Return to Me

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“Return, O faithless sons, I will
heal your faithlessness.”

“Behold, we come to You; for You
are the Lord our God.”

Jeremiah 3:22