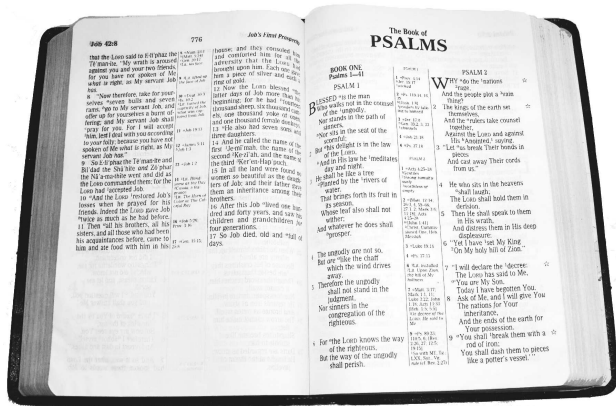


# PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



## March 2020

Bible readings from Psalms 18  
1 Peter and Nehemiah chapters 1 to 5

*As for God, his way is perfect*

Wonder of wonders! God makes sinners righteous by his grace and then rewards them for being righteous (20–24)! If we love the Lord, we will do all that we are able to keep ourselves from falling into sin (23). As we behave towards others, God will deal with us (25–26). How can we expect to find mercy from God, if we are not merciful? (cp. Matthew 6:12; 18:21–35). The Lord guides us, giving us light and strength us (28–29, 32).

There are times when we are baffled by the ways of the Lord with us. Let us be encouraged by verse 30: *As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is proven.* God's way is perfect because he is infinitely wise, powerful and good. **God's Word is a proven word because he cannot lie and he will never fail us. All his promises are true.** David proved it, countless thousands have proved it since David and so have we. Hallelujah!

God also makes our way perfect (32). He weaves blessings out of trials and works all things together for good. He supports us with his right hand and his gentleness makes us great (35; the Hebrew word for 'gentleness' is elsewhere translated 'humility'). God in grace stoops down to lift us up to make us great (and what can be greater than being a child of God?). He keeps us from falling (36). Let us worship him and praise him, for he is *worthy to be praised* (3).

*God shall alone the refuge be  
And comfort of my mind;  
Too wise to be mistaken, he,  
Too good to be unkind.*

*When I the tempter's rage endure,  
'Tis God supports my mind;  
Too wise to be mistaken, sure!  
Too good to be unkind.*

(Samuel Medley)

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*The LORD lives!*

David rejoiced in the victories that God had given him over his enemies (37–45). These verses also point to the victories of David's greater Son, the Messiah, who will triumph over all his enemies and will come again as King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:11–16). David undoubtedly possessed great skills as a leader in battle, but he acknowledged that it was God who had armed him with strength to fight (35–39). His opponents were fighting God and when they finally prayed, it was too late (41). If you are not a Christian, I plead with you, 'Do not refuse to listen to God's voice' (see Hebrews 3:7–12). It is a solemn thing to know that a time may come when God will refuse to hear our prayers if we refuse to listen to him.

We must not lead our lives as if God were dead. Never forget, *The LORD lives!* (46). We are privileged to have fellowship with the living, personal God.

- He lives to avenge us when we are wronged (47 – we must never take personal revenge on those who mistreat us; cp. Romans 12:19–21).
- God lives to deliver us and to give us victory over Satan (48). If we resist the devil, he will flee from us (James 4:7).
- The Lord lives to prosper his work, to build his church, and to keep us in all our ways.
- He is the eternal God who lives to help us through the dark valley experiences. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from his love (Romans 8:38–39).

The psalm closes with God's '*anointed*' (or 'Messiah') rejoicing in his everlasting kingdom (49–50; cp. Romans 15:9). **Let us give thanks to the Lord and sing praises to his name (49).**

*The LORD lives! Blessed be my Rock!  
Let the God of my salvation be exalted (46).*

# 1 PETER

Peter wrote his first letter to persecuted Jewish Christians who lived in the land that is now called Turkey (1:1 – *‘the Dispersion’* was the term used to describe those Jews living outside Palestine). He wrote from *Babylon* (5:13) which probably referred to Rome (often called *Babylon* by early Christians, cp. Revelation chapters 17 and 18). The letter was probably written late AD 63 or early AD 64 before the Roman emperor Nero unleashed his great persecution against Christians. Silas, who had been involved with Paul in writing to the church at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1) wrote this letter under the direction of Peter (5:12; ‘Silvanus’ is the Latin form of ‘Silas’).

Peter wrote to encourage Christians who had been *grieved by various trials* (1:6) and to prepare them for the *fiery trial* (4:12) which was soon to come upon them. He showed them how they should live at such times, encouraging them by the example of the Lord Jesus (2:21; 4:1). His sufferings were followed by glory (1:11,21) and so will ours be (4:13–14; 5:1,10).

## Key Words

*Suffering* – 1:11; 2:19–23; 3:14, 17–18; 4:1,13,15,19; 5:1,10.

*Glory* – 1:11,21; 4:13–14; 5:1,4,10.

*Precious* – 1:7,19; 2:4,6,7; 3:4.

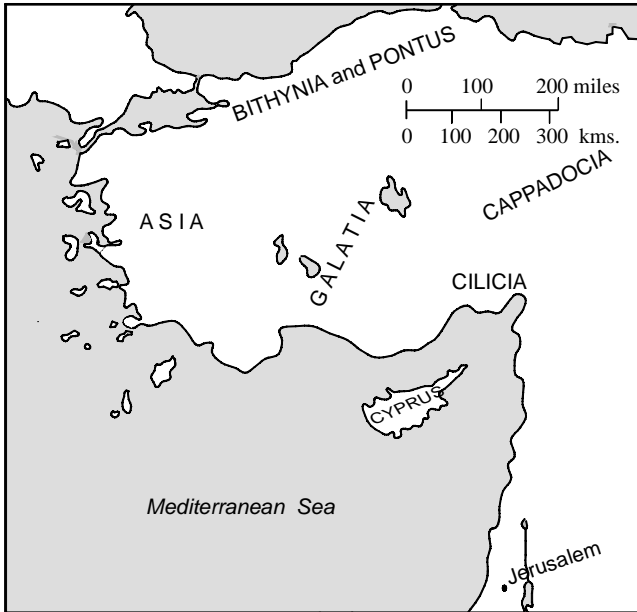
## Outline of 1 Peter

- |  |   |           |
|--|---|-----------|
| 1. Opening greetings                             | – | 1:1–2     |
| 2. Thanksgiving for salvation                    | – | 1:3–12    |
| 3. Christians called to be holy in conduct       | – | 1:13–2:10 |
| 4. Christians called to be honourable in conduct | – | 2:11–3:12 |
| 5. Suffering and glory                           | – | 3:13–4:19 |
| 6. Exhortation to elders                         | – | 5:1–4     |
| 7. Closing exhortation and greetings             | – | 5:5–14    |

## A recommended commentary:

Alexander Nisbet: 1 & 2 Peter, published by Banner of Truth.

**Map to show location of Peter's first readers (1:1)**



**Important** We often forget that the New Testament letters were originally read right through to a listening church or group of Christians. Some of the readings from Peter's letters will be repeated for several days in order to set into context the particular verses covered by the notes. Do read the repeat passage of Scripture each day so that it will be impressed on your mind.

*Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father*

Peter wrote this letter to persecuted Christians whom he describes as ‘*pilgrims of the Dispersion*’ (1) How does he encourage these hard-pressed believers to persevere in the face of severe trials? He sets before them a feast of good things concerning God and our salvation. We read of election, sanctification and the precious blood of Christ with which we are redeemed (2,18–19), of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and the abundant mercy of God (3), of our new birth (3,23), of a glorious inheritance reserved for us in heaven (4) and of the power of God to keep us until the return of Christ (5). The Old Testament prophets longed to know more of this great salvation of which they prophesied (10) and *which angels desire to look into* (12).

Each Person of the Trinity is involved in the work of our salvation (2). Every Christian is chosen by God the Father and sanctified (set apart to God) by the Holy Spirit and sprinkled by the blood of Christ for forgiveness and cleansing from sin. Many Christians are not at all clear about the doctrine of election. God did not choose us because he knew in eternity past that we would choose him. That is not the meaning of *elect according to the foreknowledge of God* (2). Scripture does not link ‘foreknowledge’ with God’s knowing how we would live or how we would respond to the gospel. God ‘knew’ us and loved us before we were born, choosing us to salvation before he created the world. The Bible teaches that election is entirely through the sovereign and gracious purpose of God and not according to any faith or good works foreseen by God in us (eg. Romans 8:28; 9:11–16; Ephesians 1:5,11; 2 Timothy 1:9).

Peter’s first readers were despised, hated and persecuted by the world, but they were precious to God who loved them and had chosen them. Do you feel rejected? Are you going through a time of trial and difficulty? **Christian, rejoice that though men of the world may reject you, God has chosen you. He will never forsake you and he will never stop loving you. Let us praise him with grateful and joyful hearts.**

*A living hope*

Peter reminds us that God the Father *has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead* (3). Our hope is rooted in the fact that the Lord Jesus died and rose again just as he said that he would (eg. Luke 18:31–33). The founders of other religions are dead but Jesus is alive. Doesn't that bring a 'Hallelujah' from your heart? The Lord Jesus is preparing a place for us in heaven (John 14:2–3) where we have an inheritance which will never decay, tarnish or fade away (4). This inheritance is reserved for us in heaven, the most secure place of all – far safer than the vaults of the Bank of England or Fort Knox. A millionaire must leave his fortune behind when he dies but the believer knows that there is an inheritance in heaven waiting for him.

Not only does God keep our inheritance safe, but he also keeps us safe. *We are kept by the power of God* and are eternally secure (5). We will receive our full inheritance in *the last time*, when Jesus comes again (5). This wonderful inheritance includes perfection, so that we will never sin again. We will have a glorified body that will never age, know pain, suffering, weariness or death. There will be rewards and surprises beyond our imagination. Satan and all that is evil will be banished to the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10; 21:8).

Peter's hope had been crushed when Jesus was crucified but despair gave way to glorious joy after Jesus rose from the dead. Must the *various trials* which grieve us crush our hopes? Never! We serve a risen Saviour and we have *a living hope* (3). *Our faith and hope are in God* (21). The very thought of all that God has done for us caused Peter to burst out in praise to God. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* (3). **We can hardly be silent, can we?**

*My name from the palms of his hands  
Eternity will not erase;  
Impressed on his heart it remains  
In marks of indelible grace.*

(Augustus M. Toplady)

*You greatly rejoice, though ... grieved by various trials*

Times of suffering or trial are very painful but the Christian is able to rejoice at such times. How can we *greatly rejoice* when we are *grieved by various trials* (6)?

- We can rejoice because we have *a living hope* (3; cp. *'in this you greatly rejoice'* – verse 6). This hope reminds us that our suffering is only for a little while and is nothing when *compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us* (Romans 8:18).
- We can rejoice because God tests our precious faith to refine it and strengthen it so that its genuineness *may be found to praise, honour and glory at the revelation* (return) *of Jesus Christ* (7).
- We can rejoice because we have a wonderful Saviour, though we do not see him (8). Though we have not seen the Lord Jesus we will see him when he comes again. To know that God loves us, and to love Jesus brings rejoicing *with joy inexpressible and full of glory* (8).
- We can rejoice because we are safe in Christ. Persecution may lead to losing our lives, but we cannot lose our souls. *Receiving the end* (purpose) *of your faith — the salvation of your souls* (9).

Why is it that we rejoice so little in Christ, even in times when we do not face trials? Could it be that our love for Christ has lost its fervour? Is it that we hardly take time for meaningful fellowship with the Lord? **If we do not rejoice in him when the sun is shining, we can hardly expect to rejoice in the storm.**

*When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;  
For I will be with thee thy troubles to bless;  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.*

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply;  
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*

(‘K’ in Rippon’s Selection, 1787)



*Things which angels desire to look into*

*The Spirit of Christ* is the Holy Spirit (11; cp. 2 Peter 1:21) who inspired the Old Testament prophets to foretell the great salvation which is ours. They *prophesied of the grace* that would come to us through Christ (10). This grace is the undeserved favour of God to hell-deserving sinners and it is by that grace that we are saved (Ephesians 2:8). The Holy Spirit also revealed that Christ would suffer, die, rise again and be exalted (11). Glories followed the sufferings of Christ and will surely follow the suffering of the child of God.

The prophets were so excited by the wonderful news of the gospel that they sought to know more about their own prophecies and to have some indication of the time when they would be fulfilled. It was revealed to them that these things would not happen during their lifetime – they are for us (12).

The gospel given to the apostles by the Holy Spirit (12) is so wonderful that even *angels desire to look into* it. Those mighty, sinless beings cannot comprehend how the almighty God could give his only begotten Son to die for sinners; how the grace of God not only brings forgiveness to the sinner, but also adoption into God's family and blessing upon blessing, including eternal life, an inheritance in heaven, rewards and more. **Can we help but rejoice, even in the most adverse circumstances? Our great salvation was purchased at tremendous cost.** There are *things which angels desire to look into* in the message of the gospel. Charles Wesley probably had this in mind when he wrote:

*'Tis mystery all! The immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the first-born seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine!  
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,  
Let angel minds inquire no more.*

(Charles Wesley)

*Therefore gird up the loins of your mind*

The word ‘*therefore*’ is very important in the New Testament. It links a verse with what has gone before in order to apply doctrine. We should always ask ourselves when coming across the word, ‘What is the ‘*therefore*’ there for?’ There are a number of ‘*therefores*’ in 1 Peter, the first of which is in verse 13.

How are we to cope with trials and suffering? Should we attempt to get on some emotional high? Not at all! The apostle writes, *Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ* (13). Let us think about this verse:

- *Therefore gird up the loins of your mind.* In Bible times men often wore long robes which hindered them in work or battle. When preparing for action, they would gather up their robes and tuck them into their belts to facilitate movement (cp. 1 Kings 18:46). In modern parlance Peter was saying, ‘Be sure that you are ready for action.’ Many spiritual battles are fought through the mind. Many Christians are too lazy to think, and the devil loves to have it that way. True Christianity never by-passes the mind but makes us think very hard. We must learn in trial and trouble to go to the Bible, and to look for encouragement from the Scriptures.
- *Be sober.* In other words, ‘Be serious-minded and level-headed’ (cp. 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:6,8; Titus 2:2,6,12). The sober person sees things as they really are. The Christian who is *sober* can be relied upon for his spiritual judgment and common sense.
- *Rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation* (return) *of Jesus Christ.* This is something that we must do. We have to place our entirely on God’s grace for the future as well as the present. **We do this by reading, meditating and depending on God’s promises.** *Therefore gird up the loins of your mind.*

*As he who called you is holy, you also be holy*

Each Christian has been born again (or *begotten*) into God's family (3,23), and the new family image should be seen in our lives. This is shown by:

- Obedience to God's will. *As obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance* (14). If we are in God's family, we are expected to obey him, not allowing ourselves to be fashioned by the evil desires which were a feature of our old way of life (14). God's will is revealed in his holy Word. We need to read the Bible every day, hear good and faithful preaching, and live according to the teaching of Scripture. We must never assume that we are children of God if we are not serious about obedience to the Lord.
- Holiness. *As he who has called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct*' (15). We must be holy like our heavenly Father (15–16). To be holy is to keep ourselves from sinning, being set apart to God so that we live to please him. Enoch *had this testimony, that he pleased God* (Hebrews 11:5). Biblical holiness does not make us miserable, but brings great joy to our lives. The Puritan William Gurnall rightly observed, 'Say not that thou hast royal blood in thy veins; say not that thou art born of God if thou canst not prove thy pedigree by daring to be holy!'
- The fear of God. *Conduct yourselves throughout your sojourning here in fear* (17). We are accountable to our Father in heaven for the way we live. As his children, we should show by our conduct that we fear him. The fear of God is not a cringing, cowardly fear, but a sense of joyful awe and reverence. When we fear God, we will not fear men. *Noah was moved with godly fear* (Hebrews 11:7) and he was a *preacher of righteousness* (2 Peter 2:5). He was used by God because he feared God.

**Obedience to God, holiness of life, the fear of the Lord. Are these things which distinguish a child of God from the ungodly seen in your life?**

*Redeemed ... with the precious blood of Christ*

To be redeemed means to be delivered from captivity or slavery by payment of a price. Peter reminds us that we have been *redeemed ... with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot* (18–19). The apostle probably had in mind Israel's wonderful deliverance from Egypt when a lamb *without blemish* was slain for each household (Exodus 12:5–7). Its blood was sprinkled on the doorposts and lintels of each Hebrew house. The people were saved from the judgment visited upon Egypt, being sheltered by the blood. They were then delivered from bondage.

Christ is described as being *our Passover* (1 Corinthians 5:7) and we are redeemed to God by his blood (Revelation 5:9). Our redemption by the blood of the Lord Jesus brings us deliverance from the penalty and power of sin. We are justified by the blood of Christ and saved from God's holy wrath against sinners. To be justified means that we are declared righteous in the sight of God so that we are no longer under condemnation for our sin (Romans 5:9; 8:1). The Lord Jesus has delivered us from bondage to Satan and to sin (Ephesians 2:1–3; Colossians 1:13). We have been redeemed from an *aimless* way of life, and as a redeemed people we must always seek to please God by obedience and holy living (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Some modern theologians hate the doctrine of redemption through the blood of Christ. To the grateful Christian the blood of Christ is most *precious*. **Had Jesus not shed his blood, died and risen again, we would still be in our sins – lost, without God and without hope.**

*Ye souls, redeemed with blood,  
And called by grace divine,  
Walk worthy of your God,  
And let your conduct shine;  
Keep Christ, your living Head, in view,  
In all you say, in all you do.*

(William Gadsby)

*Love one another fervently with a pure heart*

Peter reminds us again of our new birth and of the purifying effect that obedience to God's Word has upon our lives. Obedience to the gospel and cleansing from sin go together (22; cp. 1:2). We have been *begotten again to a living hope* (3) through the living and eternal Word of God (23). Evil men hate the Bible and the glorious message that it proclaims, but *the word of the LORD endures for ever* (25). The Word of God plays an essential part in conversion and in the Christian life. When a person is born again, a radical change takes place in his life. He obeys the truth (the message of the gospel; 25; cp. 4:17) and repents of his sin. Those who reject the gospel are described as those who are *disobedient to the word* (2:8; cp. 2 Thessalonians 1:8).

If we are born again into God's family we must *love one another fervently with a pure heart* (22). Holiness and obedience to God are shown by love to our fellow-Christians. Some believers are most difficult and we do not find them easy to like. We are not told to like one another however, but to love one another, and that love must be fervent. There should be nothing half-hearted about the love between Christians. This means that we will care for one another, pray for one another and be practical in helping one another. We often fall short of God's demands. **We talk about love for one another, we also sing about it. Now let us put love into action.**

*How sweet, how heavenly is the sight,  
When those who love the Lord  
In one another's peace delight,  
And so fulfil his word!*

*Love is the golden chain that binds  
The happy souls above;  
And he's an heir of heaven that finds  
His bosom glow with love.*

(Joseph Swain)

*To you who believe, he is precious*

When we are born again, we need spiritual food in order to grow. That food is *the pure milk of the word* of God (2). Growth is a vital part of life and if we have no desire to feed upon God's Word, we are spiritually sick, or we are still dead in our sins. There is no such thing as instant maturity in Christ. The growing process goes on throughout our Christian lives. We must grow in the knowledge of God and his Word and we must become more Christlike in our lives, *laying aside all malice, all guile, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking* (1). When we *love one another fervently with a pure heart* (1:22), there can be no place for these sins.

We should not only desire the pure milk of God's Word, but also to have fellowship with him, coming to him as to a living stone (3–4). We have *tasted that the Lord is gracious* and Peter goes on to describe us as being part of a spiritual building in which we are also living stones (5). The Greek word used here for stone is not the rough piece of rock ('petros') which Jesus used to describe Peter (Matthew 16:18), but a smooth stone ('lithos') shaped and prepared for use in a building. When we are converted there are many rough edges in our lives which have to be removed. The smoothing process that God uses is chastisement and it is painful (Hebrews 12:11). This discipline is necessary so that we will be able to offer up spiritual sacrifices of praise and service which are acceptable to God (5).

The chief corner-stone of God's building is the Lord Jesus Christ. He was rejected by the Jews, but chosen by God the Father and precious (4; cp. Matthew 21:42–45). Those who reject the gospel message stumble over Christ, refusing to submit to him (7–8). Christian, you were once disobedient and in spiritual darkness. You may once have despised Christ but now *to you who believe, he is precious* (7). **Show by your speech and conduct that Christ is indeed precious to you.**

## Jesus is Precious

*Jesus is precious, says the Word;  
What comfort does this truth afford!  
And those who in his name believe,  
With joy this precious truth receive.*

*To them he is more precious far  
Than life and all its comforts are;  
Whatever things men precious call,  
Christ is more precious than them all.*

*He's precious in his precious blood,  
That pard'ning and soul-cleansing flood;  
He's precious in his righteousness,  
That pardoning, holy, heavenly dress.*

*In every office he sustains,  
In every victory he gains,  
In every counsel of his will,  
He's precious to his people still.*

*As they draw near their journey's end,  
How precious is their heavenly Friend!  
And, when in death they bow their head,  
He's precious on a dying bed.*

*With them may I in heaven be found,  
And with thy precious glory crowned,  
Join the sweet song, and there adore  
A precious Christ for evermore.*

(Samuel Medley)

(

*His own special people*

Many of the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are applied to the Christian church. Verses 9 and 10 are two of these prophecies. Let us think about verse 9 (cp. Deuteronomy 7:6–9):

- *We are a chosen generation.* God chose us in Christ before he made the world (cp. Ephesians 1:4). We are *elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father* (1:2).
- *We are a royal priesthood.* We do not offer animal sacrifices like the Old Testament priests, but *the sacrifice of praise to God* (cp. Hebrews 13:15). Are you proclaiming *the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light*?
- *We are a holy nation.* We must lead godly lives to enable us to *proclaim his praises* (virtues). The remainder of the apostle's letter shows how this is worked out in practice.
- *We are his own special people.* Peter goes on in verse 10 to quote from Hosea 2:23 to show that the church, which consists of converted Jews and Gentiles, belongs to God. The Lord Jesus Christ is precious to us (7) and we are special to him.

Great responsibilities come with these great privileges. We have been called out of darkness into God's marvellous light. We are *pilgrims* bound for heaven and we must *abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul* (11). Spiritual warfare takes place in the flesh. We are not to yield to sinful desires but present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God in order to lead a holy life (Romans 12:1).

We are to be God-fearing citizens, beyond reproach in all our behaviour (12). We must obey the laws of our country (except when they contradict God's laws, Acts 5:29) even if rulers are evil (13–17). Remember, when Peter wrote his letter, the Roman emperor was the evil Nero. God has chosen us not because of any goodness in us. We have nothing to commend us to God. **We owe it to him to live as *his own special people* so that men will see our good works and glorify God in the day of visitation (12; cp. Matthew 5:16).**



*To this you were called*

We live in a world in which most people are being urged to stand on their rights. Obedience to God's Word means submission – we have to be prepared to deny ourselves. We saw yesterday that we must submit to the laws of our nation. Peter will go on in chapter 3 to urge wives to submit to their husbands, even if the husbands are not believers.

Servants are urged to be submissive to their masters whether those masters are good or harsh (18). It is a great trial to suffer for doing good. Peter tells us that to bear such suffering with patience is commendable before God (19–20). He points us to the example of the Lord Jesus who is sinless. When he was insulted, he did not trade insults; when he was tortured, he did not threaten (though he could have destroyed his wicked enemies in an instant). He committed himself to God the Father, the righteous Judge (21–23).

Those who believe that Jesus is a noble example to be followed but do not believe that he died to save sinners miss the great point of his coming into this world (cp. 1 Timothy 1:15). It is of course quite true that the Lord Jesus is the perfect example for us to follow, but Christ came to this earth as the sin-bearer for his people (24–25). He *bore our sins in his own body on the tree* so that we would die to our sinful way of life and live for righteousness.

We must follow his example when suffering for his sake. He is *the Shepherd and Overseer* of our souls and he lovingly cares for us (25). Are you suffering for doing good? Commit yourself to God (23) and rejoice that he has counted you *worthy to suffer shame for his name* (Acts 5:41). Peter reminds us, *To this you were called* (21). Called to suffer, called to be Christlike in suffering. **Someone once said, 'The face of true godliness is never so beautiful as when it is spat upon.'**

*That your prayers may not be hindered*

Peter now turns from the relationship between servants and their masters, and between husbands and wives. *Likewise you wives ... Likewise you husbands* (1,7). *The husband is the head of the wife* (Ephesians 5:23) but this in no way implies that woman is inferior to man. They are equal, being made in the image of God; the difference lies in our God-given roles. Though wives are to submit to their husbands, husbands must also give honour (respect) to their wives (1,7). Men who do not honour their wives are sinning. Husbands must follow Christ's example and love their wives as *Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it* (Ephesians 5:25).

When a husband or wife becomes a Christian and their spouse remains unsaved there are many trials and difficulties. The unbelieving partner does not understand what has happened and is naturally concerned that their loved one does not become 'a religious maniac'. A wife will not win her non-Christian husband by preaching at him but by her God-honouring behaviour (1–2). If this is not apparent how can she expect God to answer her prayers for him? The strident demands of the feminist movement do little to enhance the cause of women. There is a beauty which is more than skin-deep which will never fade away. Every woman can have this beauty – *the incorruptible ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God* (4).

What about husbands? They must not excuse themselves with the old saying, 'You'll never understand a woman.' There is one woman that he must understand – his wife. God commands it (7). Husbands must work at understanding their wives' problems, fears, needs, longings, etc. You are to do this *that your prayers may not be hindered*. **Christian husband, are you having problems in your prayer life? Could it be that you are not giving your wife the understanding and respect that God commands and that this is hindering your prayers?**

*You were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing*

Peter reminds us again of the Christian calling. We have already seen that God has called us *out of darkness into his marvellous light* (2:9), and that he has also called us to suffer for Christ (2:21). We were also called to bless those who ill-treat us. *You were called to this that you may inherit a blessing* (9). Many Christians go from place to place chasing after blessings (often just emotional bubbles which soon burst). We inherit a blessing by being a blessing. How can we be a blessing? Peter tells us in the verses that we have just read:

- *Be of one mind* (8) living and working together in harmony, always endeavouring *to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (Ephesians 4:3). Division in the church drives away blessing and hinders God's work.
- Have *compassion for one another*, learning to 'feel' for one another, understanding and being concerned for each other. See the hymn, 'How sweet! how heavenly is the sight ...'

*When each can feel his brother's sigh  
And with him bear a part;  
When sorrow flows from eye to eye  
And joy from heart to heart.*

(Joseph Swain)

- *Love as brothers* (see notes on 1 Peter 1:22).
- *Be tender-hearted* (cp. Ephesians 4:32). We must not be hard-hearted or ride rough-shod over the feelings of others.
- *Be courteous* (some Greek manuscripts have 'humble-minded').
- We must not try to get even with those who have wronged us, but rather bless them (9; cp. Matthew 5:44).

Look at the blessing we will inherit if we put these principles into practice (verses 10–12, quoting Psalm 34:12–16). We will see good days and enjoy the smile of God as he lovingly watches over us and hears our prayers. **What more can we want?**

*Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts*

When we show the virtues and shun the vices described in verses 8 and 9, we will usually avoid trouble (13). There are exceptions, however. Some are softened by the godly living of Christians but others are hardened by it. The latter feel shamed when their sin is exposed by the righteousness of the Christian and they may respond with verbal or even physical abuse. They may slander us for our good conduct and brand us as evildoers (16). Peter tells us that we can be happy in such circumstances. *Even if you suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed* (14; cp. Matthew 5:10–12).

We must not be afraid of the threats of the ungodly, but *sanctify* (set apart) *the Lord God* in our hearts (14–15). Matthew Henry writes in his commentary, ‘We sanctify the Lord in our hearts, when we with sincerity and fervency adore him; when our thoughts of him are awful (filled with awe) and reverend; when we rely upon his power, trust to his faithfulness, submit to his wisdom, imitate his holiness.’

Let us remember that God is sovereign over all our trials. We must overcome the temptation to react angrily and to treat our opponents with contempt when they slander us and the gospel we love. We are to be ready to answer those who oppose us, giving them a reason for the hope that is within us with meekness and in the fear of God. To be able to do this, we must know the Lord and know our Bibles. We must also have a good conscience before God which comes from God-honouring conduct (16). The Lord has often used the testimony of persecuted Christians to bring their tormentors to repentance.

We can be happy in suffering if we glorify God by our lives and by our lips. Remember also that if we suffer for doing good, it is the will of God (17) and his will is best. We may be misunderstood by unbelievers, who may even find fault with our good conduct, but we will have a good conscience before God. **When he is set apart as Lord in our hearts, we will know his presence with us and we will enjoy his blessing.**

*Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust*

Christ our sinless Saviour *suffered once for sins. the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God* (18). We have been brought to God and reconciled to him (cp. Romans 5:10; Ephesians 2:13,16)! Verse 18 contains three essential truths concerning Christ's death:

- He *also suffered once for sins*. His atoning work is complete (cp. Hebrews 7:27; 9:28). The Roman Catholic church teaches that at every Mass, the priest offers up Christ again as a sacrifice, with the wafer and the wine actually turning into the body and blood of Christ. This doctrine (known as 'transubstantiation') denies the plain teaching of Scripture and the completeness and sufficiency of Christ's death for the salvation of sinners. We do not have to do penance for sin or suffer in so-called purgatory. We have a complete salvation.
- Christ died as a substitute for sinners. Any other explanation of his death fails to understand or accept the obvious teaching in Scripture of his substitutionary sacrifice (cp. Isaiah 53:5–6).
- Christ was raised bodily from the dead by the Holy Spirit (18, 21). We serve a risen Saviour.

The *spirits in prison* are those who refused to heed the words of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of Noah (19–20). They are now bound and awaiting judgment. This will take place at Christ's second coming when their bodies will be raised. How does baptism save us (21)? The verse in no way suggests that this is water baptism. Scripture plainly teaches that we are not saved by works (Ephesians 2:8–10). Many have been baptised but later deny the faith. The baptism here has to do with a good conscience towards God which comes with the baptism of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ at conversion (cp. 1 Corinthians 12:12–13). Every Christian knows this baptism without which there can be no salvation.

Christ has ascended into heaven and is now at the right hand of God, reigning supreme over all the universe (22). The exalted Lord Jesus prays for us at God's right hand. How wonderful and encouraging. **Let us rejoice and give thanks to our great God and Saviour.**

*Therefore ... arm yourselves also with the same mind*

How are we to face suffering and at the same time live holy lives? If our attitude is wrong, we will run into trouble. Peter again urges us to use our minds. Biblical principles must be thought through and then worked out in our lives. *Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind* (1; cp. 1:13). The Lord Jesus suffered *that he might bring us to God* (3:18). He suffered *in the flesh* to save us from *the lusts of men* to do the will of God (2). We must arm ourselves with this attitude, that we are no longer our own, that we belong to God (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The old life must go! Immorality, unwholesome desires, drunkenness, wild parties, drunken orgies and idolatry have no place in the Christian life (3). Our former associates may misunderstand us and even speak evil of us (4), but they will have to give an account of their own lives to God (5).

Verse 6 is difficult to understand and opinions are varied as to what it means. I believe that in the light of the previous verse, Peter is saying that the gospel was preached to those who are now in heaven, when they were alive on earth. Their lives were transformed for the better by the Holy Spirit, but those opposed to the gospel spoke evil of them (4). The day of judgment (5) will see the vindication of God's people and the punishment of the wicked. Christian and non-Christian will have to give an account of their lives on that awesome day (cp. Romans 14:10–12). **Can you honestly say that you are seeking to live your life according to God's will (2) so that you will please him?**

*Lord and Saviour, true and kind,  
Be the master of my mind;  
Bless and guide and strengthen still  
All my powers of thought and will.*

*Thou hast made me mind and soul;  
I for thee would use the whole;  
Thou hast died that I might live,  
All my powers to thee I give.*

(Handley C.G. Moule)

*Be serious and watchful in your prayers*

What did Peter mean by *the end of all things is at hand*? Some commentators believe that it refers to the second coming of Christ, but others take it to refer to the destruction of the Jewish state (Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD). The times were difficult with unrest and turmoil in the Roman Empire and persecution coming from both Jews and Romans. How were those early Christians to conduct themselves in such times? How are we to live in an uncertain world?

- We must *be serious and watchful* in our prayers (7). In difficult times some become fanatics and speculate wildly about dates for Christ's second coming; others grow cold in their love for the Lord (cp. Matthew 24:11–12, 23–24). We must be level-headed and prayerful.
- We must *above all things have fervent love for one another*, being ready to forgive and to forget wrongs committed against us *for love will cover a multitude of sins* (8). Many in our churches have great problems and trials. We need to understand them and feel for them in their suffering. We must encourage and support them. We do not need to talk about fervent love. It must be seen and felt.
- We must cheerfully open our homes to give hospitality (9; cp. Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:1–2).
- God has given all of us gifts, not to use for selfish ends, but to use in the service of others. We must be good stewards of these gifts (10).

Preachers of God's Word have an awesome responsibility to preach as those who are delivering the words of God. To despise biblical preaching is to despise a most important God-given gift to his church. To be frivolous, shallow, light or complacent in preaching is out of order (11). In any form of service we must be whole-hearted in doing it *with the ability which God supplies*.

We may be enjoying a period of calm, peace and blessing in our Christian lives but we cannot afford to relax. Let us be serious and watchful so that we can pray more effectively. **We may not be called upon to glorify God in suffering at this present time, but we are called to glorify him in all that we do (10–11).**

*If you are reproached for the name of Christ*

We must not be surprised when *the fiery trial* comes upon us (12). Peter was probably preparing his readers for the terrible suffering that Nero was about to inflict upon them. Suffering in one form or another is part and parcel of the Christian life. We should not ask, ‘Why is this happening to us?’ but rather rejoice that we are privileged to partake of Christ’s sufferings (13; cp. Acts 5:40–41). *If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you* (14). We should also rejoice, knowing that though we share in Christ’s sufferings, we will also share in his glory when he comes again, and we will *be glad with exceeding joy* (13; cp. 5:10; Romans 8:17–18).

When we are glorified in heaven our tears will be wiped away. There will be no more sin, suffering, pain or death. **If you are being insulted by men because of your Christian faith, remember that the Lord loves you. Glorify God in suffering and commit your soul to his care in doing good (16,19).**

While there is no shame in suffering for the Lord Jesus, some Christians suffer because of their own sin or folly (15–16)! We must not complain if we suffer *as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody* (a meddler) *in other people’s matters* (cp. 2:20).

Peter warned that the time had come *for judgment to begin at the house of God*. The persecution that was already coming upon the church was the beginning of a testing and a sifting process. If judgment is harsh for the people of God, how much worse it will be for those who do not obey the gospel of God (17–18)!

*Then fear thou not what men can do,  
Nor what they say in spite:  
Rejoice to stand alone with Christ;  
Be steadfast in his might.*

(T.C. Hunter Clare)



*Serving as overseers ... being examples to the flock*

Elders serve as *overseers* who *shepherd* (or pastor) *the flock of God* (1–2). The word ‘*overseer*’ is translated ‘*bishop*’ in 1 Timothy 3:1–2. The words *elder* and *bishop* are used interchangeably in the New Testament (eg. Acts 20:17,28). The office of a bishop is not that of a man who oversees dozens of churches. There were several bishops (*overseers*) in each church (eg. Philippians 1:1).

The ability of a church to stand firm in times of trial and trouble depends much upon its elders. A well-taught and healthy church is better equipped to face difficulties and persecution than a church which receives little teaching. Elders must *shepherd* (pastor) *the flock of God*, the church (2). They are not to be eager to gain money, but rather eager to serve God and his people. The office of elder has its own temptations and one that must always be resisted is the misuse of authority (lording it over church members, 3). Leadership must be by example, by serving. Elders are to lead God’s people and must never drive them by harsh oversight. They are answerable to the Chief Shepherd (cp. Hebrews 13:17) who will richly reward faithful service.

If we are to be healthy in the Christian life, we must be prepared to submit to pastoral advice and to accept loving rebuke when we go wrong. This is why church membership is so important. In becoming a member of a church, we are undertaking to submit to the leadership of that church and to play our part in the building up of that particular fellowship. We will never be healthy in the Christian life if we insist on ‘doing our own thing’.

Bad elders will quickly ruin any church. We need to pray that the Lord will raise up many godly elders in our churches (see 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9, for the high standards demanded of elders). **How often do you give thanks for your elders? How often do you pray for them?**

*Casting all your care upon him, for he cares for you*

The word *elders* in verse 5 is more likely to refer to older men rather than those who have the office of elder. Young people must submit themselves to their elders. Many young people despise the elderly and this is sinful. This is not only a word for the young, however. We must all *be submissive to one another* (5). This can be very difficult, especially when we feel convinced that we are right and the other person is wrong. How can we have the grace to *be submissive* in such circumstances? We must *be clothed with humility* and then the Lord will give us the necessary grace. *God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble* (5 cp. Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6). Beware of pride! It brought the downfall of Satan (cp. Isaiah 14:12–15; 1 Timothy 3:6) and has been the ruin of many a person, including professing Christians.

How are we to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God (6)? We must repent of sinful attitudes such as selfishness and pride and learn to esteem others better than ourselves, seeking their well-being. We should think often about the Lord Jesus, who humbled himself to save sinners (Philippians 2:3–8). We show humility when we are *submissive to one another*, putting the interests of others before those of ourselves (Philippians 2:2–4).

Are you burdened with cares? God knows all about our trials and anxieties, and he cares. Christian, the almighty God, who is worshipped and served by multitudes of angels, cares for you. No problem is too big for him to handle or too small to concern him. Trouble at home, problems at work, financial worries, heartache over unsaved loved ones – God knows about all these things and wants you to prayerfully throw them on to his shoulders (and what immensely strong shoulders they are)! *Casting all your care upon him, for he cares for you* (7). **Memorise this verse and do what it tells you to do. It will make all the difference in your Christian life.**

*Your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion*

We rejoice that Satan is a defeated enemy but we must never underestimate his strength and his cunning. He is doomed and will be cast into the lake of fire after the return of Christ (Revelation 20:10), but at the present time he is prowling around *like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour* (8). One of his names, ‘*Apollyon*’ (Revelation 9:11), means ‘destroyer’ and he is doing his utmost to destroy gospel churches and to devour the unwary. We must never forget that we are engaged in spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10–18).

The devil was behind all the persecution suffered by those early Christians and he continues to attack God’s people today. He is very subtle and he not only uses persecution to attack us but he also sows seeds of doubt in our minds about God’s faithfulness. He attacks when we least expect and for this reason the Word of God exhorts us, *Be sober* (level-headed), *be vigilant* (8). Let us take care in the things that we read or watch. Do not pay attention to gossip which gives Satan an opportunity to do his evil work in our minds.

The devil may be *like a roaring lion* but we are able to *resist him* in the strength of God (9; cp. James 4:7). We must stand firm in the faith and to do this we must know God’s Word. Many professing Christians are woefully ignorant of the teachings of Scripture and Satan has been able to bring confusion and heresy into churches. We are not above suffering; it is common to Christians throughout the world (9), but *the God of all grace* will supply grace for us to meet every situation (10). The Christian life is not easy. We will be insulted and we may suffer *fiery trial* (4:12) but there is no happier life in all this world and eternal glory awaits us (10). ***To him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen*** (11).

Peter dictated his letter to Silvanus (the Latin name for Silas). He closes with greetings from the church in Babylon (Rome; cp. Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 18:2) and from Mark, the Gospel-writer (12–14).

# NEHEMIAH

The builders of ancient cities surrounded them with walls to give protection against their enemies. When the Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BC, Jerusalem, its temple and city wall were destroyed. God raised up Nehemiah to lead the people in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. He was cup-bearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes I. The king appointed him to be governor of Judah (5:14). Nehemiah was a man of prayer (eg. 1:4; 2:4; 4:9; 5:19; 13:31). There was much opposition to the work of rebuilding the city wall just as there had been to the rebuilding of the temple in the previous century. Nehemiah was faithful and courageous in the face of this opposition. He persevered despite setbacks and discouragement and the work was completed.

## Outline of Nehemiah

- |     |   |   |              |
|-----|---|---|--------------|
| 1.  | Distressing news from Jerusalem               | – | 1:1–11       |
| 2.  | Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem                    | – | 2:1–20       |
| 3.  | List of builders of the wall of the city      | – | 3:1–32       |
| 4.  | Rebuilding wall in the face of opposition     | – | 4:1 to 7:4   |
| 5.  | List of exiles who returned with Zerubbabel   |   | 7:5–73       |
| 6.  | Ezra reads and explains the law to the people |   | 8:1–18       |
| 7.  | National repentance and signing of covenant   |   | 9:1 to 10:39 |
| 8.  | List of inhabitants of Jerusalem              | – | 11:1–36      |
| 9.  | List of priests and Levites                   | – | 12:1–26      |
| 10. | Dedication of the wall of Jerusalem           | – | 12:27–47     |
| 11. | Later reforms                                 | – | 13:1–31      |

## Recommended commentaries:

Derek Kidner: Ezra and Nehemiah (IVP).

G. Coleman Luck: Ezra and Nehemiah (Moody Press).

*I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven*

Though Zerubbabel had completed the rebuilding of the temple in 516 BC, the wall of the city still lay in ruins seventy years later (the events in this chapter are dated at the end of 446 BC). Nehemiah, a Jewish exile, was a trusted servant of the Persian king, being his cup-bearer (11). His brother Hanani came from Jerusalem with disturbing news (2; cp. 7:2). God's people were in great distress. They suffered reproach from their enemies and the city wall had been destroyed (an attempt had been made to rebuild it but the work had been stopped through enemy opposition; cp. Ezra 4:12–13, 23).

Nehemiah was much affected when he heard of the plight of the people in Jerusalem and its surrounding towns. He records, *'I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven'* (4). Nehemiah's prayer came from a burdened heart and he approached God with reverence (5). **We must always have an attitude of reverence when we come before the Almighty in worship and prayer.** The Lord Jesus emphasised this when he taught the disciples to pray, *'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name'* (Luke 11:2). *'Hallowed'* means 'reverenced'. Nehemiah confessed his own sins and those of the people and called upon God to give him favour with the king (6–11).

Fasting and prayer are hard work! As we read the book of Nehemiah, let his prayer life challenge us. Nehemiah was a servant of a great earthly king, but first and foremost he was the servant of the great and awesome God of heaven (4–6, 11). This truth should encourage us, for our God is sovereign over kings and governments and he still uses them to further his purposes, as he did in Nehemiah's time. **Are you easily discouraged? Are you feeling distressed? Are you burdened for the salvation of a loved one? Have you fasted and prayed before the God of heaven?** He does not change. He still works in sovereign power and his ways are wonderful. To him be all the glory!

*The good hand of my God upon me*

Nehemiah was so full of sorrow for the plight of Jerusalem that it showed on his face. When the king asked him the reason for his sorrow, he was very fearful (2). The king's servants were not supposed to be unhappy in the presence of their sovereign (cp. Esther 4:2) and offenders could be severely punished, even by death. Nehemiah told his story to Artaxerxes, who then asked him, '*What do you request?*' Nehemiah turned his thoughts to God in prayer before making known his request (4). He had begun praying about the situation in Jerusalem in December 446 BC (Chislev, 1:1). It was in April 445 BC (Nisan) when he began to see the Lord answer his prayers (1).

Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah how long he would be away if he went to Jerusalem (6). We are not told how he replied, but we do know that he was away for twelve years (5:14). The king gave Nehemiah all that he asked for and also soldiers to escort him on his journey to Jerusalem (7–9). Why was this? Nehemiah acknowledged that it was '*according to the good hand of my God upon me*' (8; cp. verse 18). Nehemiah walked with God and found that the Lord had prepared the way for the king to honour his requests.

Ezra was another man who acknowledged the hand of God upon his life (Ezra 7:6,9,28). We saw in our notes on Ezra chapter 7 that to have God's hand upon us means that he is with us, watching over us and helping us. When God's hand is upon us we are aware of his holy and awesome presence. When the Lord's hand is upon us, we are able to serve him in the most adverse circumstances.

When the good hand of our God is upon us, we will also seek the well-being of our fellow Christians just as Nehemiah sought the well-being of the children of Israel (10). What a tremendous privilege it is to know that almighty God who created the universe will condescend to have his hand upon us! **What blessing can compare with that of knowing the good hand of our God upon us?**

*Let us rise up and build*

Three days after his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah surveyed the ruined walls of the city by night. Nothing remained of the great gates that had once guarded the various entrances through those walls. There was so much rubbish and debris by the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool that it was impossible for Nehemiah to continue riding his animal (11–15). He had not yet told the religious or civil leaders about his plans but after completing his viewing of the walls, he told them what God had laid on his heart. He also told them of the good hand of God upon his life and of the encouragement given to him by the king (12, 16–18). They responded with enthusiasm, saying, '*Let us rise up and build*' and set about beginning the work.

Having God's hand upon us does not mean that we will be free from trouble or difficulties. When God is working in our lives, we can be sure that Satan is not far from us. Sanballat, a governor over the Samaritans, was deeply disturbed to receive a copy of the king's letter setting out Nehemiah's purpose in returning to Jerusalem (9). He and his friends laughed at the builders and despised them, but they said, '*The God of heaven himself will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build*' (19–20).

What lessons are there for us here in the twenty-first century? The church is described as God's building, but we are scorned by the world. We have been infiltrated by 'wolves' who destroy rather than build up. We see our 'walls' broken down, and are aware of weakness, confusion and discouragement. Remember, Christ is the head of the church, which is his bride. What are we to do? We must rise up and build. We can only do this if we are faithful to God's Word and seek to walk with him and obey him. **Do you pray much for the church, for your church? What are you doing to build it up? In what way are you involved in the work of your local church?** *Let us rise up and build.*

*Their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord*

Long lists of names do not make interesting reading, but there is much to instruct us from some of the comments contained in the list of the wall-builders. We will follow the diagram on the next page in an anti-clockwise direction and imagine that we are with Nehemiah as he walks round the wall to see how the work is progressing.

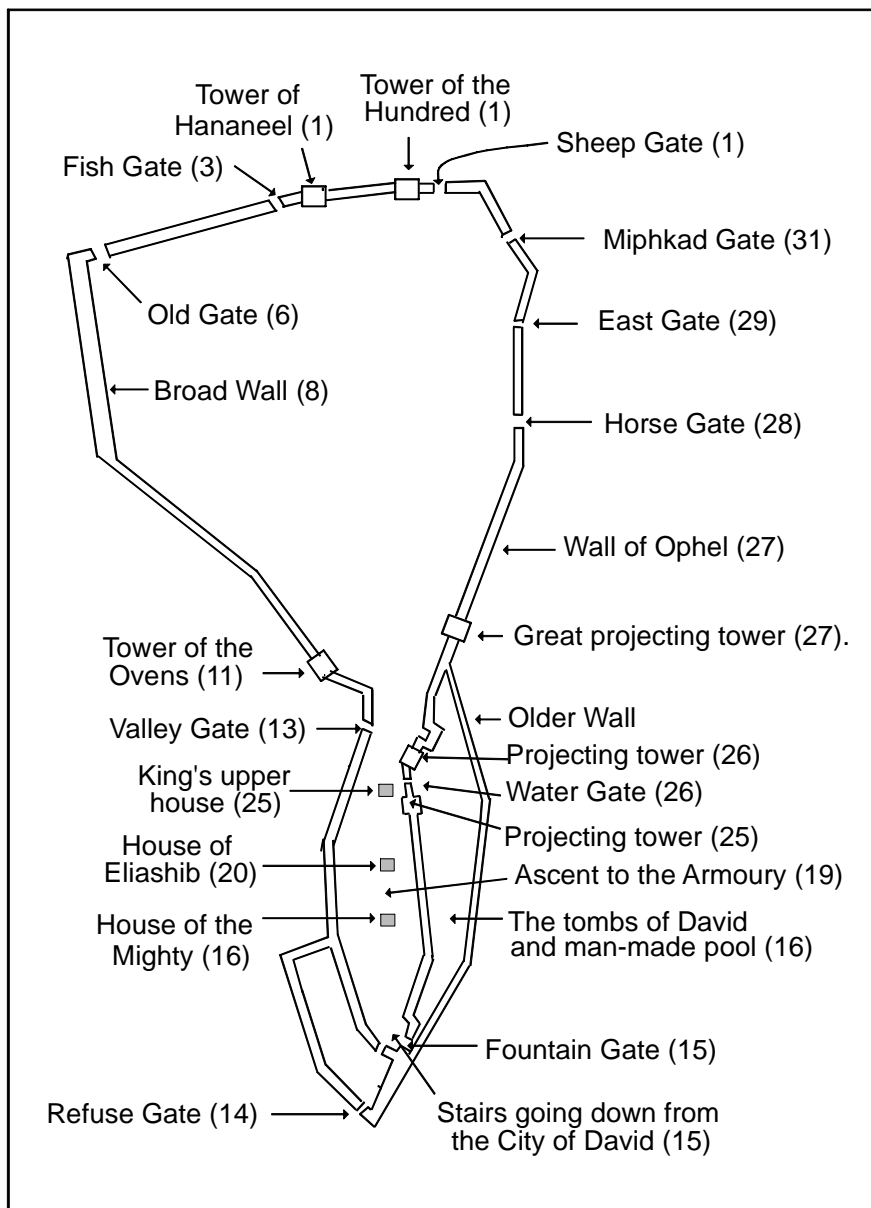
Eliashib the high priest did not consider that it was beneath him to get his hands dirty. Together with other priests he built the Sheep Gate, two towers and the wall lying between (1). A believer may attain a high and respected position in the world or in the church, but if he refuses to be involved with the more ‘mundane’ jobs in the fellowship, it may be a mark of pride. The northern section of the wall was the only part which needed to be rebuilt. In all other instances after verse 3, the work is described as ‘repairs’.

Next to Eliashib and the priests, men from Jericho were building (2). Though they lived about fifteen miles to the north-east of Jerusalem, they were concerned for the well-being of their capital city (cp. Psalm 122:6–7,9). Other builders came from Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah and Zenoah (5–7, 27). We must develop a prayerful concern for the church of God and have a wider vision than our local church. Do you pray for other churches as well as your own? Do you pray for missionaries, for persecuted Christians?

Some were less than enthusiastic in the work. *The Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord* (5). They did the work with bad grace and failed to set an example to their own people. Many churches rely on the ‘faithful few’ because many will *not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord*. How is it with you? Can you be relied upon as a faithful worker in the church? There are many ministries, apart from personal evangelism; there is work among the young and elderly, visiting the sick, practical deeds of kindness and faithfulness in prayer. **We will all have to give an account of ourselves to God (Romans 14:12). Will you be ashamed?**



**Wall of Jerusalem rebuilt by Nehemiah and the people**  
*(Verse references from Nehemiah chapter 3 in brackets)*



*Baruch ... diligently repaired the other section*

The building work attracted all types of people including skilled craftsmen such as goldsmiths and perfumers (8,31). Let us move further round the wall to the Tower of the Ovens which may have been the location of the city bakery. We see Shallum, leader of half the district of Jerusalem, and his daughters involved in the repair work (11–12). Those young women put to shame the half-hearted nobles from Tekoa. We wonder if they responded to the need because of a shortage of workers? Faithful Christian women still put to shame many men who are not nearly so zealous in their work for the Lord!

Malchijah, another district leader, repaired the Refuse Gate in the south, through which all the rubbish of Jerusalem was taken away for disposal (14). As we continue round the wall, heading northwards, we see a man named Baruch, working by the house of the high priest. He *diligently repaired the other section* (20). Here is a conscientious workman whose attitude was, ‘Only the best is good enough for the Lord.’ We must always remember that whatever we do, we should *do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men* (Colossians 3:23). This goes for the place of employment as well as in the church! People may despise our Christian beliefs, but we must never give them cause to say that our work is shoddy or below par.

The Nethinim were working around the Water Gate and in the projecting tower (26). They were servants in the temple and may have been descendants of the Gibeonites or other foreigners who had been absorbed into the Jewish religion (see Joshua 9:27). ‘Nethinim’ means ‘dedicated ones’. They were dedicated to the work of God. The phrase ‘*next to them*’ or ‘*next to him*’ is repeated throughout the chapter. The people were united in the work. There was no room for personality differences which would have hindered the progress of the building. Without unity, the work would have failed! **We must never allow Satan to divide us. We have a great challenge in our churches with much work to do. Will you be a diligent worker?**

*Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord*

We were introduced to the leaders of the opposition to God's people in chapter 2, verse 10. They were Satan's tools to hinder the work of God. They continued to pour scorn upon the Jews (1–3), but this drove Nehemiah and the people to seek God in prayer and to be on their guard (5–6, 9). Scorn can be a very powerful and effective weapon in Satan's armoury. When Sanballat, Tobiah and their allies saw that scorn did not deter Nehemiah, they plotted to *attack Jerusalem and create confusion* (7–8). All this was too much for the builders from Judah who became weary, weak and discouraged (10).

The work prospered, however, because it was accompanied by prayer and by trust in God (9, 20). Though the Jews were threatened by attacks upon them (13–23), they *had a mind to work* (6). We have seen repeatedly in our Bible readings that **God honours those who work. Lazy Christians dishonour God and accomplish little for him.** Nehemiah recognised that there was more at stake than the rebuilding of the wall. The fight was for their own survival and that of their families (14).

In the face of opposition Nehemiah encouraged the people, saying, '*Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight ...*' (14). Are you afraid of those who scorn and oppose the gospel? Do they intimidate you? **We serve the almighty God. Why should we be afraid when he is for us (Romans 8:31)?** *Our God will fight for us* (20). *Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight.* Be bold and persevere in your work and witness for the Lord. He will not fail you!

*Fear him, ye saints, and you will then  
Have nothing else to fear;  
Make but his service your delight;  
Your wants shall be his care.*

(Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady)

*Should you not walk in the fear of our God?*

Though Nehemiah faced many pressures from his enemies, he was not lacking in problems from his own people. The men of Judah had become discouraged (4:10) and now many of the people were starving through famine (2–3). The poor had been forced to mortgage their land and houses in order to buy food and to pay taxes levied by the Persian king. Some of their children had been taken into slavery because of unpaid debt (1–5). The rulers and nobles among the Jews were profiting from the distress of their poor neighbours by lending out money at a high interest rate (7). They then seized the land and possessions of those who were unable to keep up the repayments. God had forbidden such practices (Leviticus 25:35–37).

Nehemiah was very angry with these heartless rulers and nobles. After giving the matter serious thought, he rebuked them. He then called a great assembly against them (6–7). He showed great courage in admonishing those who were influential, for he risked losing their support. Nehemiah challenged the rulers saying, *‘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). Sin brings reproach to the work of God and does great harm to the church. The nobles heeded the challenge and promised to restore all the land and the possessions that they had taken from the poor in usury (10–13).

Nehemiah showed a great example in his leadership. Power and authority did not corrupt him *because of the fear of God* (15). He was sensitive to a burdened people and did not exact from them taxes to support him as their governor (14–19). *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom* (Psalm 111:10). This godly fear produces a holy hatred of sin and a longing for greater holiness (2 Corinthians 7:1). It moves us to have compassion and practical concern for our needy brothers and sisters (Ephesians 4:32; 1 John 3:17–18). **Is it evident to those around you that you are walking in the fear of our God?**

**Notes for 31 March are included with those for April**