1:2 *Who had escaped*- The urgency of 'fleeing' from Babylon was understood by Nehemiah; he speaks of those who had returned to the land as those who has "escaped" from Babylon- even though they had returned with every blessing from the authorities. He perceived as few did the vital danger of remaining in the soft life of Babylon. The call to leave Babylon is used in the New Testament as the basis of the appeal to mentally leave this world and start a journey towards the restored Kingdom of God on earth at Christ’s return.

1:10 When Nehemiah speaks of them having been redeemed by Yahweh’s “strong hand” he is using the language of Is. 40:10, regarding how Yahweh would come and save Israel from Babylon and make them ‘come to Jerusalem’ “with strong hand”. Nehemiah saw the prophecy could have been fulfilled then. The way Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:5-7), Ezra (Ezra 7:8; 8:32) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:11; 13:7) are described as ‘coming to Jerusalem’ may hint that they could have fulfilled this coming of Yahweh to Zion; they could have been Messianic figures. So much potential was set up- and wasted- at the time of the return from exile.

1:11 *Your servant*-It seems that Nehemiah could have been a Messiah figure. He ‘came up’ from Babylon, and was “the servant” who ‘prospered’ Yahweh’s work (also 2:20), just as the servant prophecies required (Is. 53:10; 48:15); and he was thereby the redeemer of his brethren (5:8). He encouraged the singing of praise on the walls of Zion (9:5; 12:46), surely in a conscious effort to fulfil the words of Is. 60:18- that Zion’s gates in Messiah’s Kingdom would be praise. He was “despised” as Messiah would be (2:19; Is. 53:3 s.w.). He entered Jerusalem on a donkey, as Messiah would (2:12 cp. Zech. 9:9); and 2:16 sounds very much like “of the people there was none with me” (Is. 63:3). The Gentiles round about came to sit at Nehemiah’s table to eat and drink (5:17), just as Isaiah had prophesied could happen on a grander scale at the restoration of the Kingdom. One wonders if the potential fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies was transferred to him? And yet Nehemiah returned to Babylon at least once, and there is no record that on his second visit to Judah he stayed on, but rather, the implication seems to be, he returned again to the service of Babylon. The total lack of Biblical information about his later life may reflect this disappointing decision. This train of thought enables us to appreciate the joy and pleasure which the Father had when finally His beloved Son lived up to all that He sought and expected. One of the great themes of the restoration is how much potential was wasted. It seems Nehemiah could have been a Messiah figure but failed, as did others, to live up to what was potentially possible for him. We must seek to perceive in our lives all those things which are potentially possible for us in God’s strength.

2:2 The king’s servants were supposed to be always happy and positive in his presence. But Nehemiah’s very body language reflected the pain he felt for his impoverished and spiritually weak brethren in Judah. He didn’t allow his own wealth and comfortable social standing somehow isolated himself from them, and as such is a valuable example to the more wealthy and comfortable members of the body of Christ today.

2:4 *So I prayed*- There are times when we need to pray in a half second, with eyes open and fully engaged in a situation. But the fact God welcomes and accepts this kind of prayer doesn’t mean that we can reduce *all* our prayer life to this level; carefully prepared, prolonged prayer is also to feature.

2:6 *The queen was also sitting by him*- The implication seems to be that she influenced him to be positive towards Nehemiah and the Jews. She may have been Esther, or some other Jewess.

2:12 God put the idea of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls into Nehemiah’s heart, and yet it’s clear from 2:2 (see note there) that his own conscience had led him to this idea. God therefore confirms us in the desires of our hearts, positively or negatively.

2:16 We feel here and in :12; 5:7 (“consulted with myself”) Nehemiah’s loneliness in his mission; a feature of all God’s true servants, no matter whether or not they like Nehemiah they are flanked by supporters and resources to perform their mission.

2:20 Gentiles didn’t come and help the Jews in building. It could be that their refusal of Gentile help to build the temple, insisting that only Jews work in it (see too Ezra 4:3), was actually going too far; by being so exclusive, they were disallowing the fulfilment of the prophecies both in Zech. 6 and in Isaiah, that Gentiles would help in the final rebuilding of Zion.

3:5 *Their nobles didn’t put their necks to the work of their Lord*- All these centuries later, God still has note of who amongst His people were true workers and who weren’t (He noted too that some “earnestly” did the work, :20). Significantly it was the nobles, the lords and leaders of the people, who found it hard to submit beneath *the* Lord and Master. The higher our social standing and the more human respect we command in this world, in whatever context, the harder it will be for us to recognize that we are merely humble servants beneath the Lord of all creation.

3:8 Goldsmiths and perfumers were hardly civil engineers and building site labourers; neither were the wealthy daughters of a ruler (:12). But God’s work at times requires us to do what is quite against the grain of our natural inclination; resulting as it did here in men and women of totally different backgrounds, social positions and specialisms working together to do His work. It should be the same in the ecclesia of today.

3:15 The emphasis in the record on bars, gates and locks was perhaps to highlight how the restoration prophecies of Ezekiel, of a people living confidently without those things, had actually not been fulfilled; and therefore the prophesied events of Ez. 38-40 didn't happen- i.e. an invasion of a restored Judah, dwelling without bars and gates, which would lead in to the rebuilding of the temple and establishment of the Kingdom.

3:31 Nehemiah did his best to bring the potential Kingdom of God about by urging the people to repentance and conformity to God’s will, such was his perception of what was going on; that the coming of God’s Kingdom was being limited by the apathy of his own people. No fewer than 24 times in Ez. 40-48 are we told that the temple was to be built by ‘measure’ (e.g. Ez. 40:3,5,10,21,22,24,28,29); and the same word occurs frequently in describing how Nehemiah gave various groups of Jews their own “portion” [s.w. ‘measure’] in the work of rebuilding Jerusalem (:11,19,20,22,24,27). He arranged for 12 gates to be built in the wall, as Ez. 48:31-34 had commanded there to be. He built *miphkad*, “the Muster Gate”, the “appointed place” [s.w.] of Ez. 43:21. As he ‘measured out’ the work of rebuilding Jerusalem, he must have been conscious of the Kingdom prophecy of Jer. 31:38-40. It could have been fulfilled, this could have been the potential Kingdom of God, and he set about to seek to fulfil it; but those places were not kept “holy unto the Lord”, and therefore the Jews were to be again plucked up and thrown down.

4:4 Is. 51:3-11 is clearly in a restoration context: “For Yahweh shall comfort Zion: He will comfort all her waste places... Hearken unto me, you that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is My law; fear not the reproach of men [s.w. Neh. 1:3; 2:17; 4:4; 5:9 re. the reproach of the Gentiles against the partially rebuilt Jerusalem], neither be afraid of their reviling”. Insofar as Nehemiah and the Jews knew this prophecy, they would have taken great encouragement. But maybe they were unfamiliar with it, and yet still did the work, although lacking the encouragement which they could have had. Our familiarity with God’s word becomes of great value when in a difficult situation we suddenly perceive how we are being spoken to directly by God’s prophetic word.

5:1-5 The prophecies of the restored Kingdom emphasized that the princes would not then oppress the people (Ez. 45:8,9; 46:18); but we see here that they did (see too Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5). Jer. 7:3-7 made it clear that Judah’s return to the land was to be conditional upon them not oppressing the poor- only *“then* will I cause you to dwell in this place”. Yet in His grace and zeal for His people, it seems God overlooked that condition- for the returned exiles *did* oppress each other, and yet they returned to the land. And yet they would’ve dwelt in Zion “for ever and ever” (Jer. 7:7) if they had not been abusive to others and truly loved God. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi all record social injustice as being the order of the day at the time of the restoration.

5:7 See on 2:16.

5:8 *We... have redeemed our brothers*- God redeemed the exiles from Babylon (Is. 48:20; 51:11; 52:9; 62:12), and our response to that redemption should be to redeem others and not abuse them.

5:15 Is. 58:1,2 is a criticism of Judah in exile and also of those who did return to the land- they sought God daily, and yet abused their brethren (Is. 58:6), just as recorded here. If they had ceased from their sins, "Then shall your light break forth as the morning", if they had fed the hungry etc, then would've been fulfilled the Messianic Kingdom prophecies of the light of Zion rising above the Gentiles etc (Is. 58:10,12 cp. Is. 60:1). These Kingdom predictions will ultimately come true at Christ’s return to earth and the establishment of His Kingdom here, but we will only be there if we learn the lessons from Judah’s failure and don’t abuse our brethren.

6:1 *There was no breach left*- Amos 9:11-15 refers and the “remnant” of the ten tribes to the land under Ezra: “In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old”. The passage goes on to prophecy a time of great fertility and victory over “Edom”. “I will raise up” uses a Hebrew word commonly featured in the records of the restoration, when the people were exhorted to “arise up and build” (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 10:4,15; Neh. 2:18,20). The statement that they would “close up the breaches thereof” is exactly the language of Neh. 6:1, which records that the walls were rebuilt so that there was no breach [s.w.] therein. It was after the Babylonian invasion that Zion was “fallen” and ‘ruined’ (s.w. Jer. 31:18; 45:4; Lam. 2:2,17). “I will build it” is exactly the theme of the records of the return from Babylon (Ezra 1:2,3,5; 3:2,10; 4:1-4; Neh. 2:5,17,18,20; 3:1-3, 13-15; 4:1,3,5,6,10,17,18; 6:1,6; 7:1). Surely Amos 9 is saying that at the rebuilding at the time of the restoration, God’s people could have ushered in the Kingdom age of agricultural plenty and victory over their Arab neighbours. But they intermarried with Edom, and suffered drought because they didn’t fulfil the requirements to rebuild Zion correctly. But the words of Amos were still to come true in some form- they are given an application in Acts 15:17 which may appear to be way out of context, i.e. to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thus words which could have had a plain fulfilment at the restoration were given a delayed fulfilment; but they were not fulfilled in a literal sense, but in a spiritual one. And so it may be with many prophecies about us today; they could be fulfilled if God’s people are more ‘fulfilling’ of them.

6:3 *Why should the work cease*- This should be our perspective in such times of conflict; cries of unity and reconciliation can be used as a mantra to make God’s work cease, and we shouldn’t be afraid to see them for what they are. The way the opponents of God’s work created a false allegation- that Nehemiah was setting himself up as king- and then tried to blackmail him over it (:7,8) is typical of what happens in these situations. We can simply insist we are telling the truth and not be afraid to name false accusation for what it is (:8).

6:11 As eunuchs weren’t allowed within the temple, this could suggest Nehemiah was a eunuch; for he says that for a man like him to enter the temple would be a sin (:13). He would likely have had to be made one in order to be the king’s cupbearer (1:11), but he used the limitations which this world had unreasonably placed upon him in order to funnel his creative energy into God’s work and the welfare of His people and the things of His Kingdom.

7:2 Nehemiah’s brother Hanani was given “charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man”- not just because he was the boss’s brother, which is how the nepotism of those times would have usually required (Neh. 7:2). It can be that human qualification, e.g. being a successful businessman, or the brother of a leading brother, is related to positions of eldership amongst us. Yet the Nehemiah passage shows that although sometimes there may be overlap between both spiritual and human qualification, it is the spiritual qualification which must be paramount.

7:5 Nehemiah made a special study of the genealogies in order to find an acceptable priesthood (:5), and perhaps this was the basis for the genealogies written up in the early chapters of 1 Chronicles. So there were Israel returning from captivity, led by a faithful remnant of the priests, looking back through their history, right back to Abraham and beyond, and seeing that their history was shot through with failure. Such self-examination extended even to considering the names parents gave their children.

7:6 Seeing that the majority of the Jews chose the soft life and remained in Babylon, God was especially sensitive to those who returned; and for over 2500 years these names have been recorded in His word. Such is His awareness of all those who respond to the call of the Kingdom and to forsake this world. Note how the numbers are recorded very exactly. God was sensitive to each and every one who returned.

7:7 This describes Zerubbabel as being at the head of twelve leaders of the returning exiles, who are called “the people of Israel” (cp. Ezra 2:2). Whilst it was Judah who had been taken into captivity, it seems that some of the ten tribes [who had been taken into captivity in Assyria some time earlier] also returned with them; it was God’s intention to create a new, unified Israel in the restored Kingdom. But most of God’s people then as today chose not to participate in the unity plan He had desired for His people.

7:54 Comparing the list of names in the list of returnees in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, we find that a number of names recur in both lists, e.g. Bazluth (Ezra 2:52; Neh. 7:54). It could be that some went from Babylon to Judah with Ezra, then returned to Babylon, and returned with Nehemiah. This hardly sounds like the glorious, positive, confident return of the captives to Zion prophesied in the restoration prophecies. Like us at times, God’s people lost their nerve in quitting this world and dedicating themselves to the things of His Kingdom.

8:1 *As one man*- Genuine desire to accept God’s word and repent for failure (:9) is what brings unity amongst His people.

8:10 *Send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared*- The receipt of forgiveness from God should lead to our being materially generous to others. Hence Paul urges the Corinthians to be materially generous to their poorer brethren because of God’s grace to them, thus making a play on the fact that the Greek word translated “grace” essentially means a gift. God’s gift of forgiveness to us leads to our giving to others.

*The joy of Yahweh*- In the context, this refers to His desire to forgive His people; He actually is joyful in forgiving us, as we should be in our forgiveness of others; not doing it from a sense of grudging necessity.

8:12 *Because they had understood the words*- The need for correct understanding of God’s word is because it motivates to action in practice. See 10:28.

8:14-17 Ez. 45:25 had specifically prophesied that the feast of the seventh month would be strictly kept in the restored Kingdom. The fact they hadn’t done so until now shows how they didn’t want to fulfil the restoration prophecies because the immediate daily issues of life took them away from obedience to God’s will. Note that Zech. 7:5 criticised the Jews for keeping this feast only externally, and not “unto me”. Hag. 2:1 records how on the 21st day of the 7th month- i.e. once the seven day feast that began on the 15th had finished- Haggai was sent to rebuke “the prince”, Zerubbabel, for being so slack in fulfilling Ezekiel’s vision. They subconsciously switched off to Ezekiel’s words; just as we can all do. They reasoned that “the time” of which he spoke hadn’t come- even though the temple had miraculously been enabled to be rebuilt, for no human benefit at all to Cyrus (Isaiah 45:13 “not for price nor reward”). Like us, they failed to see the personal reality of God’s word to their situation.

9:2 The account of Judah’s separation from the surrounding peoples reads similarly to that of the purges from idolatry during the reign of the kings. They separated / purged, and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6:21); by Ezra 9:1 they are in need of separating again; and by Ezra 10:11 likewise; then they separate (Ezra 10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Nehemiah 9:2; 13:3. Our spiritual progress has too much of this kind of pseudo repentance associated with it.

9:6 *You are Yahweh, even You alone*- There is archaeological evidence that there was another god called ‘Yahweh’ worshipped by the Canaanites; hence the confession here that Yahweh God of Israel was the only true Yahweh. There are in our world many things which can appear as the true God when they are but fake imitations.

9:10 *Made a name for Yourself*- God’s Name isn’t simply a word, it is His entire personality as historically demonstrated and articulated in human history.

9:19 *Yet the pillar of cloud didn’t depart from over them*- Even in periods of sin and failure, God still tries to lead His people towards the Kingdom rather than totally disassociating from them.

9:30 *Your Spirit through Your prophets*- The prophets, whose words we have in the Bible, were inspired by God through the process of Divine inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16). Their words which we read in the Bible are thereby God’s words and a channel of His Spirit to us.

9:37 Faithful men like Nehemiah felt so identified with the sinful people that they could speak of “*our* sins”. If we are true members of His people then we will feel the state of the community as being our state, rather than seeing ourselves as somehow separate from them. Nehemiah was therefore the first to seal the covenant of repentance (10:1).

10:28,29 The people “separated themselves from the peoples of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters… they *joined* with their brothers”. Close fellowship with our brethren arises from having gone out from the surrounding world and being separated unto the things of God’s word. The Hebrew idea of “holiness” carries the idea of being separated *from* the things of this world *unto* the things of God. We see that happening here; separation isn’t a merely negative idea. The separation is positively *unto* other things.

*Each one who had knowledge, and understanding*- See on 8:12.

10:32,33 The Mosaic Law had required a half shekel temple tax, but this was reduced here, apparently with God’s blessing- such was His desire to work with them and have them as His people (Ex. 30:11-16).

10:39 They divorced their Gentile wives, and then took more (in the times of Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi). They vowed not to forsake the house of their God, and yet Nehemiah concludes with the record that this is exactly what they did (13:11). They were slack paying the tithes, then they paid them, they slacked again, then they paid them, then Malachi records how they again didn’t- several times this cycle is recorded. Likewise the withholding of agricultural blessing occurred several times- in 5:2,3 (as prophesied in Is. 51:19), in Haggai’s time, and later in Malachi 3:10,12; when the restored Zion could have been as the garden of Eden, i.e. paradise restored on earth (Is. 51:3). Here we see frightening similarities with ourselves. We know, but often don’t do. We sense this cycle of failure, crying out for mercy, receiving it, failing again, crying for mercy, receiving it, failing again...we see it in Israel, in our brethren and those around us, and in ourselves. We can expound it, lament it, feel the shame and tragedy of it all...and yet continue to have a part in it. Eventually, the people stayed in this groove so long that they degenerated into how they were at the time of Malachi- self-righteous, with no sense of failure any more, living self-centred lives of petty materialism, earning wages as they did in Haggai’s time, to put into pockets with holes in, life without satisfaction, achieving nothing, passively angry. This is what Malachi clearly portrays. It’s a terrible picture, and one which we at times can sail dangerously close to identifying with.

11:1 Neh. 7:4 obliquely comments on the tragedy- that the city was large and great, but the people who returned from Babylon were few who lived in it, and the houses weren’t rebuilt there. When “the time to favour Zion” came, at the end of the 70 years, God’s servants were to “take pleasure in her stones, and favour [even] the dust thereof”; and then, “when the Lord shall build up Zion, He shall appear in his glory” (Ps. 102:13-16). But the few Jews who returned chose not to live in Jerusalem, preferring to carve out for themselves farmsteads in the countryside, and the strength of those that shifted the rubble in Jerusalem decayed… they saw her dust and scattered stones as a nuisance, and didn’t take pleasure in them (4:10). And so the Lord could not then appear in glory. Short term attitudes, satisfied with our little lives and homes, rather than the bigger picture of God’s glory, a failure to perceive our potential as individuals and as a community- this is what limits so many possibilities which God has potentially enabled. God was therefore especially sensitive to those who had the faith to live in Jerusalem, and for millennia He has recorded their names and brought them before Bible readers- hence the detailed list of their names in this chapter. Note that the list of names of those who lived in the towns outside Jerusalem isn’t so detailed (:25-33).

12:30 Those who purify others must firstly purify themselves. Whatever spiritual work we try to do for others must be based upon our first having achieved it in our own lives; otherwise our appeal to others will lack integrity and power of persuasion. In our context, our purification is through baptism into Christ.

12:39 Ez. 48:31-34 envisaged the 12 gates of Jerusalem being named after the 12 tribes of Israel. But it seems no accident that twelve separate gates of the city are mentioned in the restoration record- but they weren't renamed after the tribes of Israel. Here are the names of the city gates in Nehemiah: valley (3:13); horse (3:28); east (3:29); Miphkad / muster (3:31); water (8:16); dung (12:31); fountain (12:37); Ephraim, old, fish, sheep and prison gates (12:39). No wonder some wept when the rebuilt temple was finally dedicated- the pattern of Ezekiel's vision hadn't been followed, even on such basic matters as the names of the twelve gates of Jerusalem. They could have renamed them, but lacked the willingness to see God’s prophetic word as relevant in detail to their lives, just as we can wish to constantly place a distance between God’s word, the black print on white paper, and our lives today.

12:43 *They... rejoiced; for God had made them rejoice with great joy*- God is able and willing to confirm us in the mental attitudes we choose to have.

13:1 Their ignorance of God’s word seems amazing (cp. 8:17). This may partly be because in an illiterate society, access to God’s word depended upon the few literate ones reading it and faithfully explaining it to them. We note that despite ignorance of parts of God’s word, and thereby disobedience to them (and sins of ignorance were still counted as sins), God still accepted them. This shouldn’t lead us to personal complacency, but to tolerance and patience with those who are disobedient to and even ignorant of parts of God’s word.

13:7-9 In the restored Kingdom, there were to be “holy chambers” in the temple for the Levites (Ez. 46:19 and very often in Ezekiel 40-48). The uncircumcised Gentiles were not to be brought into the sanctuary (Ez. 44:7). It was God’s intention that when Judah returned from Babylon, the uncircumcised would not come into Zion (the temple), and the Kingdom would be established (Is. 52:1,11). There was to be no Canaanite in the house of Yahweh (Zech. 14:21). Yet Tobiah the Ammonite was given a chamber in the temple for him to use as an office for undermining God’s people. All this wasted potential is so tragic; and if it is to us who read from such a great distance in time and understanding, how much more was it for God. We can therefore sense His eagerness to work with us who have vowed to be His new Israel and become the seed of Abraham through baptism (Gal. 3:27-29).

13:8 *It grieved me severely*- Hearts that bleed will feel not only for the world, but for our brethren too. His grief led him to discipline Tobiah. Grief should likewise be the motive for ecclesial discipline today (as in 1 Cor. 5:2). The same word is translated "sad" in 2:3. The King observed that his "sorrow of heart" was written all over his face, even though he was trying to conceal it. His sadness for his weak people was engraven in his body language. Instead of being naggingly critical of our brethren, there should be this genuine grief.

13:17,18 The house of the restored Kingdom was not to be profaned (Ez. 44:7); but Judah profaned the Sabbath and profaned the temple by their marriage with Gentiles and their “weariness” with the temple ordinances (Mal. 1:12; 2:10,11). They got bored with the things of the Kingdom, and so they had no part in it.

13:19 Is. 60:10,11 had foretold: “And the sons of strangers shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister unto you [as happened in the decree of Cyrus]...Therefore your gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night”; and then as Ez. 43 had also described, “I will glorify the house of My glory” (Is. 60:7). But due to the Jews’ abuse of the Sabbath and their refusal to believe Yahweh would be the promised wall of protecting fire to them, the gates could not be open continually, and had to be shut at night (see too 7:3). And Antiochus quite soon after Nehemiah’s time destroyed them [which shows how the spirituality involved in what we do, e.g. the building of the wall, is the essential thing, rather than the achievement of anything in itself]. The implication of the prophecies about Zion’s open gates was that whosoever wished could then come at any time to seek Yahweh. But men were potentially turned away from Him, and His Kingdom not realized... just because greedy, materialistic Jews wanted to have a few more coins in their pocket as a result of their trading on the Sabbath. And so with us, our meanness towards God’s word, our selfishness, our desire to have more than we need to cover us in the case of any eventuality, all this effectively shuts up the Kingdom against men. If the Pharisees could do just this, it is possible for us to do it. The salvation of others has been delegated into our hands.

13:19,20 Ez. 46:3 had predicted that “The people of the land shall worship at the door of this gate before the Yahweh in the Sabbaths and in the new moons”. But encouraged by the materialism of the Jews, “the people of the land” hung around the gates of the city on the Sabbath in order to do some trading of goods. Petty materialism was one factor which led even to Christ’s betrayal; and it so easily does so time and again in the lives of God’s children.

13:27 Nehemiah stridently criticized Israel for yet again marrying Gentiles. He described their action as "breaking covenant with our God in marrying strange wives"; the Levites likewise "defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood" (:29) by their marriages. Marriage out of the Faith is this serious; it is a breaking covenant with God.