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THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

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I. Request (ch. 1, 2.)

Introduction. The name Nehemiah means 'comforter given by Jehovah', an appropriate title for the movement of the story. According to the testimony of the Apocrypha he 'sacrificed', which presumably means he was a priest, and in ch. 10 where he signs first as governor, the other signatories are all Priests, Levites or Princes.

Though the book deals with a work of God, the main emphasis seems to be on the man, an important reminder that the work God blesses is where there is a man whom He can use.

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Request for news. Much has been written about the date of Ezra and Nehemiah, but it is here assumed that Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. The scene opens in Shushan (Susa) the winter residence of the King where Nehemiah is comfortably settled as the King's cupbearer. God has His representatives everywhere, Obadiah in Ahab's house, the saints in Caesar's household, and Nehemiah here. The one important fact is that wherever the servant is situated the Lord requires him to be faithful (1 Cor. 4:2). Like Moses of old Nehemiah did not let the comforts of his circumstances blind his eyes to the distress of his brethren. It is clear that he really had the work of God at heart, and it is interesting to note that while those locally situated in Jerusalem had apparently not maintained their spiritual zeal, the impulse to action came not from the native colony but from one at a distance. As so often, 'the onlooker sees most of the game', for his detached viewpoint helps him to see things more correctly in perspective.

Reproach. Hanani brought news of distressing conditions in Jerusalem, but it seems that Nehemiah was informed because he enquired. To be well informed about the Lord's work the man of God must have 'a heart at leisure from itself, to soothe and sympathise,' and he must take the initiative in seeking news. It is all too easy to be parochial and strictly limited in outlook. But the Christian who cannot go to the uttermost part of the earth is none the less bidden to lift up this eyes and look, and also to pray.

The news given could quite literally refer to the state existing ever since the Babylonian destruction, but as that was some 140 years earlier it seems perhaps hardly adequate to explain Nehemiah's grief. But a wrong state of affairs is none the less wrong because it has continued thus for many years, and those who live in such circumstances tend to settle down in a rut and acquiesce in existing conditions. But there had been an interruption to the work of the Temple in Ezra's time (Ezra ch. 4), and perhaps further damage done to the city which may explain Hanani's news. However that may be it is important to face up to conditions as they really are. Though we may have a vision of a glorious future, we must also be realists (cf. 1 John 1:8; Rev. 3:17).

Repentance and Confession. The effect of this news was not a superficial reaction but a very real repentance and humiliation. One of the dangers against which the man of God must always be on his guard is superficiality. Nehemiah 'mourned' for some days, and the word so used is that indicative of formal lamentation over the dead or on account of sin (Gen. 37:35; Ezra 10:6; Dan. 10:2). 'No man,' says Maclaren, 'will do worthy work at rebuilding the walls who has not wept over the ruins.' But times and fashions change, and the tears of an Apostle Paul or a John Wesley might seem out of place—as far removed from us, perhaps, as are the results which followed their preaching. While the outward signs of emotion in themselves have no value, unless we feel as deeply and are really moved we shall not move others. The business of working for God calls for reality, and it is prayer and fasting which the Lord prescribed as the means of blessing (Matt. 17:20, 21). Both Ezra and Daniel approached God in

much the same way, the former as he realised their lack of separation from the ungodly, the latter as he 'understood by books' the predicted activity of God in the captivity (see ch. 9 in each case). There seems to be a logical order: wrong conditions—judgement in consequence—facing up to the facts—making this a definite matter of prayer—blessing. It was a reverent approach to 'the great and terrible God' (cf. Deut. 7:21), and a humble confession of sin in which Nehemiah fully acknowledged his own responsibility. It is so easy to be unselfish here, to confess the sins of others without ranging ourselves alongside and admitting our own guilt. Nehemiah confessed failure to adhere to the Word of God.

Remembrance of Promise. But Nehemiah knew his Bible, knowing that with predictions of chastisement for departure from God there are also promises of restoration and blessing where there is true repentance (cf. Lev. 26; Deut. 30:1-5 etc.). But the repentance must be real. The 'turn' of verse 9 is more properly 'return' for it signifies a return from the wrong road, and the repentance is no mere feeling or emotion but a practical demonstration in keeping and doing His commandments. Obedience is absolutely essential for any joy or blessing in the Christian pathway. Such an obedience is followed by a regathering to the place where He has caused His name to dwell. It is this Hebrew word ('caused to dwell') which gives us the word Shechinah, the visible manifestation of the Lord's presence. As ever, it is to the obedient servant that the Lord reveals His presence.

Did Nehemiah perhaps pray in the words of David? (Ps. 51:18). Certainly his thoughts seem deeply steeped in the very words and thoughts of the Scriptures and his attitude of humble confession was such as to ensure success in his petition to God and to man. In this way does God work out His purposes as He moves the heart of a responsive servant to seek that which He is desirous of giving, and Nehemiah was amongst those who desired (better—'delighted') to fear His Name (verse 11). Only as his prayer concludes does this servant of God think of himself and include a personal petition. Nor in his humility has he so far mentioned his position in the royal household,

but of necessity he refers to it now in order to explain the circumstances that follow.

Ch. 2. Report to the King. The events of verse 1 appear at first sight to have occurred some 8 months before Ch. 1:1 but the dates may be reconciled if we assume that Nehemiah used the later sacred calendar, or it may be no more than a scribal error, thus allowing the lapse of some four months between Ch. 1 and 2. Nehemiah is delightfully reticent about himself. As a practical man—and the whole book demonstrates him to be that—he must have thought out the whole matter and weighed up its possibilities. Perhaps it was during those days of mourning and fasting that he came to see that the responsibility for action in this matter must be his. Perhaps he only decided after much prayer for guidance, and the lapse of time may have been caused by his waiting for the opportune moment, especially if, as seems probable, he was only one of several cupbearers. The day came and his sorrow was noticed, and he was much afraid, either lest his request should mean his death or lest his sorrow should be misconstrued as treason. But prayer was already being answered as was evident in the King's gracious favour as Nehemiah reported the conditions. Having prayed to God (Ch. 1) he did not believe in leaving God to do it all: he believed in the need of human co-operation as well. It is hardly likely that he had not been in the King's presence during these past months, but he had not been sad before (verse 1), but now the decision was made. He justified his sorrow before the King and there is an appropriate time for this (cf. Eccles 3:4); indeed there is a mourning which brings much blessing (cf. Ps. 126:5, 6; Matt. 5:4).

Reliance upon God. Nehemiah's prayer life is worthy of study and will claim our attention later. Here is an interesting example of a swift uplifting of the heart to God in a moment of time, during a conversation with the King. Such prayer requires much practice. Only one living in close and constant touch with God, one to whom prayer was very much of an everyday reality could turn effectively to the Lord like that. One of the greatest factors in prayer is the realisation of His presence and the faith to which that realisation gives birth, and a believer living out of touch

cannot easily achieve that in a moment of time as Nehemiah did. Whether a prayer for guidance for his own words, or for grace in the King's response, it must have been very brief and to the point (cf. Eccles 5:2 and illustrated Matt. 14:30). Similar ejaculatory prayer is recorded in the case of the Lord Himself and Stephen (John 11:41, 12:27 and Acts 7:60).

Request of the King. Such an attitude of faith was rewarded with an immediate answer, and the King's question opened the way for the request of Nehemiah. Clearly he was no visionary: there is the danger lest the man of prayer may be so spiritual that he is no earthly use, but Nehemiah was not of that order. With all his prayers he was a practical man of business, with all his answers ready, for he set a time and knew for whose assistance he would require royal letters. If the bad news of Ch. 1, did refer to the events in Ezra 4 it is the more easy to understand Nehemiah's apprehensions as he sought permission to build again, but the decree to stop the work had also left a loophole for its resumption. Nehemiah availed himself of this, and secured letters of safe conduct so that his journey might not be impeded, and obtained a permit for timber from the so-called Garden of Solomon some 6 miles south of Jerusalem. It is well that in the work of the Lord possible hindrances should be foreseen, as far as one can, and that all reasonable steps should be taken to provide for these in accordance with legal requirements, for if there is failure here it provides an obvious opening for the enemy. Nehemiah secured what he sought, and attributed this, as always, to the 'good hand of my God upon me.' Clearly his character must also have commended itself to the King else he would not have committed such authority to him. Practice should always be linked with prayer, and conduct should commend our confession of faith.

Reference to the enemy. This subject will be dealt with in our next section, where there are frequent references to enemy activity, but it is well to note here the fact of the opposition. No real work of God will ever be undertaken without the opposition of the enemy being aroused, though it may appear in a variety of forms.

Reconnoitring the position. Nehemiah arrived as governor with an armed retinue which would strengthen his position, but he set about his work in a quiet, humble fashion. He seems to have emerged from the S.W. gate and proceeded along the valley of Hinnom and Kidron, having to dismount some of the way. This was done quietly by night, to avoid arousing undue curiosity or suspicion. Before any great work can be undertaken there must be adequate examination of the whole position and careful planning, and Nehemiah did not reveal his intentions to the leaders nor commit himself to anything until he knew the facts. The inhabitants of Jerusalem do not seem to have given him a welcome, but that did not deter him.

Re-assuring one's colleagues. In the work of God much depends on the character and personality of the leader. Nehemiah evoked the required response in three ways. (a) He explained to them, for they were resigned to their lot. (b) He exhorted them to work with him, showing the reason why they should do so. Such a state of affairs was a reproach to the name of the Lord and he was rightly anxious to remove this. (c) He encouraged them by his own personal testimony of blessing, *the* most effective encouragement to discouraged workers. 'So they strengthened their hands for this good work.' As so often, one man's vision results in the activity and co-operation of many, and the work of God goes forward.

(To be continued)

That I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. *Eph. 3:8.*

Every ray of glory that shines forth from God, all His many-coloured wisdom in which He displays Himself, His counsel, His purpose, the thoughts of love divine that flow from His heart, are all expressed in the Christ, the Wisdom of God, glorified at God's right hand. Then, in the heavenly city we see the reflection of Christ in its many-coloured stones, its jasper wall, and its costly foundations, while the glory of God fills it.

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