



An Outlined Commentary on
NEHEMIAH

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CHAPTER I

HOW SHOULD THE PEOPLE OF GOD BUILD? WITH PRAYERFUL NECESSITY

Nehemiah 1:1-11a

How frequently today we watch on television the numerous reports of road accidents. We are shocked to a degree as we sit comfortably in our living room. But the full horror is edited out. Then one day we are driving along a highway and we actually come across an accident that happened seconds ago. Nothing is edited. We feel sensitive all over, frightened to look at the real truth! Then as we drive away, we almost instinctively slow down and resolve from then on to be more careful in the extreme. It is the full reality, not evident in our living room, that causes us to take the horror of the road toll seriously.

So it is the case with the problem we face today concerning the state of the Christian Church in America. We sense the critical condition of Christianity in the north-east region, the impotence of our present witness, yet in an edited form in the ease of our homes, as it were. But the stark reality of such a spiritual wilderness has not really effected us. One of the reasons is that we have not known a spiritual outpouring in our community, nor does our local church life reflect the power and presence of God in such a way that we tremble, we weep, we rejoice, we have a sense of awe in our worship. Consider Jonathan Edward's description of the awakening that overtook Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1735.

[T]he town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of *love*, nor of *joy*, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in *families* on account of salvation being brought unto them; *parents* rejoicing over their children as new born, and *husbands* over their wives, and *wives* over their husbands. *The goings of God* were then *seen in his sanctuary*, God's *day* was a *delight*, and his *tabernacles* were *amiable*. Our public assemblies were then beautiful: the congregation was *alive* in God's service, every one earnestly intent on the public worship, every *hearer* eager to drink in the words of the *minister* as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, *in tears* while the word was preached; *some* weeping with sorrow and distress, *others* with joy and love, *others* with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.¹

So with the case of Nehemiah, it could not be said that his concern for the spiritually depressed state of God's people, both in Shushan, Persia, and Jerusalem, was from a comfortable distance. Rather he himself had participated in the decline of Israel, mingled with its decadence, and experienced the severe punishment that God had imposed, that is subjection and humiliation before pagan foes. It is for this reason that he did not respond with indifference, as if merely musing in a recliner.

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, I, p. 349.

A. INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH.

In the history of the nation of Israel, after the golden reigns of David and Solomon, for the following 325 years there had been steady decline in godliness. Northern Israel had a continuous succession of bad kings such as Ahab with Jezebel, until in 722 B.C. the kingdom was captured by Sennacherib and deported to Assyria. Southern Judah did have some godly kings such as Asa, Jehosaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah, but also the worst of all, Manasseh for 55 years, that included child sacrifices. There finally came a succession of bad kings that culminated in the Babylonian Captivity under Nebuchadnezzar, and the destruction of Jerusalem, including the Temple, in 586 BC.

This Babylonian Exile, of approximately 70 years, lasted until the proclamation of Cyrus, the Persian who, in 538 B.C., issued a decree allowing the captives to return to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1-3). The first contingent of 50,000 returned in 537 B.C. under Zerubbabel, the head of the tribe of Judah, for the purpose of rebuilding the Temple. The second contingent of 2,000 returned in 457 B.C. under Ezra the Scribe, for the purpose of establishing pure worship and marriage reform. The third contingent of 445 returned in 445 B.C. under Nehemiah, a cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, for the purpose of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and again, the establishment of marriage reform.

Thus those who returned had come to grips at close hand with God's "furnace of affliction" (Isa. 48:10) and discipline. No longer was idolatry a problem. There was the need of leadership and direction, though the hearts of God's people were now soft. This is an indispensable requirement if the work of God is to receive His blessing. Such an attitude is especially evident as we commence the Book of Nehemiah and note how he embodies this quality before believer and unbeliever alike. There must be a softness of heart in both God's leaders and their flocks if the work of God is to prosper.

B. NEHEMIAH'S CONCERN FOR SPIRITUAL POVERTY, VS. 1-3.

If you can recall the Book of Esther, you will remember that Queen Vashti was eventually replaced by Queen Esther, the Jewess who married King Ahasuerus at Shushan in western Iran, near the border of Irak. King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes I, was eventually murdered by a government minister, and the King's son, Artaxerxes succeeded him. So this King Artaxerxes now has a Jewish cupbearer or butler named Nehemiah, meaning "comforted of Jehovah," who longs for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and eventually becomes its governor.

1. In a foreign environment, v. 1.

Although Nehemiah is approximately 1,000 miles from Jerusalem, the God of Jerusalem (Ezra 7:15, 19) is not far from the heart of Nehemiah

2. In the children of God, v. 2.

Here is an assembly of a remnant of God's people, Nehemiah, along with "Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah." Outside of official work hours a fellowship meeting is held at which the heart of Nehemiah, aching over the shameful state of God's cause in Jerusalem, bursts forth with enquiry.

3. In the city of God.

The report is not good. As they had imagined, according to underground intelligence, the cause of God in Jerusalem continued to be one of disgrace, disorder, and despair, after 140 years!

C. NEHEMIAH'S CONCERN FOR PRAYER, VS. 4-11.

How does Nehemiah respond? Perhaps he felt physically weak. So he, “sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven,” v. 4. One can agree that the spiritual state of America is at the lowest point in its history. But how do we respond? With the comfortable unease with which we view an accident on television, or with the intensity of Nehemiah whose very soul was in agony over the spiritual poverty of his people?

But is that all there is to the problem for Nehemiah, that is weeping and bemoaning about a situation he is so removed from, that is 1,000 miles away? Not in the slightest. To begin with there is eloquent, heartfelt prayer that pleads with God by means of thoughtful doctrine. Further he is bold enough to address his pagan master and ruler concerning the disaster that Israel continues to endure. He has a specific plan; he will not just pray and pout but rather pray and present an enterprising plan that doubtless even some of his Jewish friends scorned as being too ambitious. He prays intelligently, but also allows circumstance to guide his thinking. Then, four months later, 1:1, cf. 2:1, lo and behold, a providential moment arises when the king asks a question of Nehemiah: “Why is your face sad though you are not sick? . . . What would you request?” 2:4. Did Nehemiah shy away from the passion of his heart? Not in the slightest. He reverently and courageously laid out a specific blueprint, and reaped a remarkable harvest. He prayed for success, 1:11, and was granted success, 2:4-6.

1. His approach toward God, v. 4.

The “weeping” and “mourning” and “fasting” and “praying” were all in response to a passionate inner yearning for the spiritually arid state of God’s people in their appointed territory. It was a prolonged four month period of intercession with God, doubtless with his friends as well, in which gloom was mingled with perseverance.

2. His appreciation of God, vs. 5-6a.

Nehemiah’s comprehension of God was not remotely abstract, but definitive, that is specific in terms of who God is and who He is not.

- a. He is the “LORD God,” or “Jehovah Elohim, that is the only living God of Israel. Nehemiah uses God’s own personal name, revealed only to His redeemed people (Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2-8); it is a ground of confident access.
- b. He is “the great and awesome God,” cf. 4:14; 9:32-33, as similarly regarded by Daniel (Dan. 9:4), but especially recalling Deuteronomy 7:17-23 (21)

- c. He is the God of covenant/promise-keeping faithfulness, of loyal love, who has unconditionally pledged through Abraham to make Israel “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2).
- d. He is the God of obedient expectations, firstly love, and then obedience to His righteous commandments as a consequence, even as Deuteronomy 7:7-9 declares to be of the essence of a true child of God.
- e. Do you see then that authentic and effectual prayer must have the specific God of the Bible as its object, even “Our [My] Father,” (Matt. 6:9), or “Holy Father, . . . righteous Father” (John 17:11, 25). However, this is not a mere doctrinal acknowledgment, but a fervent entreaty, “I beseech You, O LORD.”

3. His confession toward God, vs. 6b-7.

- a. Israel has sinned collectively, v. 6b.

The “sons of Israel,” including Nehemiah and his relatives, have primarily sinned against God in His holy heaven, v. 4, and not just one another (Ps. 51:4).

- b. Israel has sinned profoundly, v. 7.

The “sons of Israel, including his relatives, have sinned specifically against the revealed law of Moses, the Word of God, “very corruptly/wickedly.” No excuses are offered, no minimizing.

4. His supplication toward God, vs. 8-11.

Here Nehemiah is not really reminding God of His Word so much as expressing His confidence in the promises of that Word. God is not forgetful, but His children often are.

- a. Remember your promise of dispersal, v. 8.

Implicit here is confession: “Yes, we are justly scattered because we have been unfaithful. Here we are, 1000 miles from home, rightly reaping what we have sown.”

- b. Remember your promise of reconciliation, v. 9.

However the promise is also that repentance will lead You to bring us back, “to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.” So, as David prayed: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way” (Ps. 139:24). Nehemiah confesses a repentant attitude of heart concerning, “Your servants who delight to revere Your name,” v. 11.

- c. Remember Your possession, v. 10a.

Lord, this scattered people continues to belong to You, notwithstanding their being dispersed and downtrodden. Therefore deal kindly with Your inheritance.

- d. Remember Your redemption, v. 10b.

Lord, this scattered people remain those You have redeemed, the objects of your great saving power. Therefore show your mighty hand once more.

- e. Remember the honor of your name, v. 11a.

- (1) There is confession of reverence.

Lord, Adonai, Master over your people, we now revere Your name with great earnestness and delight. Lord, hand religion has yielded to heart religion!

- (2) There is a call for success.

Lord, Adonai, Master over your servant, grant him success in what his heart longs for, that is the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the City of God.

- (3) There is the evidence of success.

As Nehemiah had asked for success, 1:9; 2:4-5, so it was granted, 6:15-16; 8:1-18 (2-3); 9:1-3. But his enquiry of God was not casual; it was born of an aching heart and a profound vision of God and His kingdom. So, “we do not have because we do not ask” (Jas. 4:2). And we do not ask because we lack the aching heart and vision of God and His kingdom.

CHAPTER II

HOW SHOULD THE PEOPLE OF GOD BUILD? WITH GOD DIRECTED BOLDNESS

Nehemiah 1:11b-3:32

THE last line of Nehemiah 1:11 reads: “Now I was the cupbearer to the king,” and as in the NASB, it probably should commence the first verse of chapter two. This job description certainly tells us a lot about Nehemiah. In times when kings were subject to poisoning, the cupbearer must be utterly trustworthy as a wine taster and not simply a connoisseur. A king would readily appreciate as well how important it was to keep on good terms with such an important servant. Hence this was a high ranking position that may have engendered animosity and jealousy amongst other Jewish captives. However, that King Artaxerxes should employ a Hebrew slave probably indicates a discernable spiritual quality: “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men” (Prov. 22:29). Such was the case with Joseph (Gen. 39:8-9; 41:38-44) and Daniel (Dan. 1:17-20).

A. BOLDNESS BEFORE A WATCHING WORLD, VS. 1-10.

During four months of weeping, mourning, fasting, and praying, evidently Nehemiah had made considerable effort *not* to visibly communicate the depression in his soul. After all, kings expected a more joyous and complimentary environment. “Now I had not been sad in his presence.” Nevertheless he was, “smiling on the outside and weeping on the inside,” and eventually the inside began to show on the outside.

1. Nehemiah’s courage before a *watching* pagan ruler, vs. 1-3.

The commanding enquiry by the king, “Why is your face sad?” might normally have solicited a quickly engineered smile. But not now. The initial response is great fear, especially since this very king, at the beginning of his reign, had commanded the rebuilding efforts of Ezra in Jerusalem to stop due to anti-Semitic opposition (Ezra 4:17-24). However both courage and diplomacy take over. God has opened a door and it is to be recognized as such and used. So with reverent boldness, Nehemiah tactfully explains his problem. He does not unfold his primary concern, that is the honor of Jehovah, even the name of Jerusalem, but rather the general disrepair of “the city, the place of my father’s tombs.” Probably he wept and trembled.

2. Nehemiah’s courage before a *listening* pagan ruler, vs. 4-8.

- a. He prays first, as is his customary priority; it takes place in a nanosecond, yet God readily comprehends and gives attention to this pressing need of His child, v. 4.
- b. He pleads faithfulness in ministry, having a record. Nehemiah is not really wondering if he has served adequately. He is like an employee who knows he is worthy of a raise in salary, and he is not afraid to press his case, v. 5a.

- c. He pleads the rebuilding of Jerusalem, having a plan. He has been musing about this in prayer and discussion with his friends. If the king had asked for more specifics, he was ready, v. 5b.
- d. He pleads before the Queen, Damaspia, according to secular history, a former concubine and head of the king's harem; this may have made her sympathetic to Nehemiah's cause, and thus a benefactress. She was also the successor of Queen Esther, the Jewess, and knew of the earlier deliverance from Haman, v. 6a.
- e. He pleads having made preparation, with a schedule at the ready. Hence the king senses serious efficiency, and grants the request. As a result Nehemiah presents a printed itinerary that includes his commitment to return. But he also declares his need of a passport, official letters of recommendation. No detail has been neglected in his thinking, vs. 6b-7.
- f. He pleads for material support, having a blueprint. Knowing of the wealth of Artaxerxes and the need of building materials, Nehemiah is not slow to solicit a letter of credit for a considerable sum of money. Paul was not backward either in seeking financial support for the suffering church in Jerusalem. Spurgeon and Moody also had their benefactors. Here is bold enterprising initiative, v. 8a.
- g. He doubtless prays in conclusion, acknowledging God's goodness. Surely this prayer, as before, first addressed God according to His glory and sovereignty and goodness. But now there is focus on heartfelt thanksgiving that testifies: "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory . . . forever and ever. Amen." (Eph. 3:20-21).

3. Nehemiah's courage before *cooperating* pagan governors, vs. 9.

So through overshadowing providence, Nehemiah is granted safe passage by means of a military escort and royal letters of introduction. His route was probably via Babylon, Hamath and Damascus in Syria, the eastern side of Galilee, Jericho, Samaria where the enemy Sanballat was governor, and Jerusalem.

What an account of success, then, you say. No, this is not success, but merely entrance into the highway leading to success. Just because Nehemiah's initial prayer is answered does not mean that a smooth path ahead is guaranteed. For success comes in spite of many obstacles and discouragements. The redemption of Israel out of Egypt under Moses did not mean the avoidance of a howling wilderness. The anointing of David as the king of Israel did not grant him the absence of conflict from surrounding enemies. The appointment of the apostles as the building blocks of the Christian church did not carry with it the assurance of a trouble-free ministry. Yet all of these were successful!

4. Nehemiah's confrontation with a *hostile* anti-Semitic world, v. 10.

In the cases of Moses, David, and the apostles, opposition to their plans for the kingdom of God was quick to appear. So with the building intentions of Nehemiah. Even before arrival at Jerusalem, Sanballat and Tobiah inject their antagonism that will

be ongoing. They despise the Jews and will do all they can to repress them. Anti-Semitism is not new!

But the success that God grants cannot be thwarted by man's most hostile efforts. Haman tried, and was hung on his own gallows; Antiochus Epiphanes tried, and died of madness in Babylon; Hitler tried and committed suicide in Berlin, utterly humiliated. So we read here of overriding success in vs. 19-20. But this was not the success of passivity, as 3:1-32 plainly indicates. Those who are disinterested in building deserve to live in ruins. Only those who would build for the glory of God deserve to dwell in the edifices that he oversees. Do you labor for the kingdom of Christ? What exactly are you doing that God would be pleased to bless with success?

B. BOLDNESS IN SURVEYING SPIRITUAL DESOLATION, VS. 11-20.

Some of the most memorable pictures of the Second World War were those of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, also Prime Minister Winston Churchill, roving through the ruins of London during the Battle of Britain. During that time, to stir a people that could easily become depressed, Churchill gave some historic speeches that were both arousing and defiant. In 1940, following the evacuation of Dunkirk, with Europe collapsing before Hitler, the Prime Minister addressed Parliament and asserted: "We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." As an alumnus of Harrow School in 1941, he sang songs and addressed the student body: "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never - in nothing, great or small, large or petty - never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."

So Nehemiah, upon returning to devastated Jerusalem, faced a similar situation. He was, first of all, a realist in his assessment of the desolate condition of the City of God, offering "nothing but blood sweat and tears." But he was also a visionary in terms of his hopes for what the City of God might become, while defiantly announcing to the enemy, "We shall never surrender!" So for the Christian today, with much of the City of God, the church of Jesus Christ in shameful ruins, overrun by the enemy, its walls of holy separation broken down, there is likewise the need for realism, honest confession. But at the same time there is not to be fatalistic resignation to despair, but rather a bold optimism that proclaims, "The God of heaven will grant us success.," v. 20.

1. A godly analysis of the present, vs. 11-16.

Consider that Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem was the fulfillment of his greatest hopes. He had read and heard about Jerusalem's former glory, its present devastation, but he had never visited the city before. The initial three days of settling in, v. 11, of meeting with officials, of hearing their pessimistic reports, of confronting skeptics, must have been depressing.

a. It is filtered through what, "God was putting into my mind, v. 12.

Here is a man with vision that is rooted, not in ambition, but revelation. He has, what the prophets describe as, "the burden/load/oracle of the word of the LORD"

(Jer. 23:33-38; Zech. 9:1: 12:1; Mal. 1:1). Here is divine constraint that is building up inward pressure that must eventually erupt in energetic and obedient labor. It is like the fire of truth in the belly of Jeremiah (Jer. 20:8-9) that opposition could not quench, the apostolic zeal of Peter and John who protested: “We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

b. It is focused on present desolation, vs. 13-15.

(1) Evidence of disrepair .

The private, select tour of Jerusalem, at night time, is probably designed to hide Nehemiah’s real intentions from his enemies. It seems to circle the city, as if to especially examine its wall and security status. It is a disheartening scene that reflects a disheartened people that yet does not dishearten Nehemiah. He is a man, not controlled by outward circumstances, but rather the inner constraint and vision of the Word of God.

(2) Evidence of depression.

The fact that Nehemiah found parts he could not traverse even with his donkey, v. 14, indicates that the ruinous condition had remained for over 100 years! This was probably due to the likes of Sanballat and Tobiah, eager to maintain Jewish impotence. As a depressed person tends to neglect personal appearance, so it was the case with the remnant in Jerusalem. They did not have the stomach for rebuilding.

2. A godly proposal for the future, vs. 17-18.

Nehemiah’s meeting with the city officials, probably the day following his inspection, must have been one of powerful persuasion. The expressions, “I said to them, . . . I told them,” vs. 17-18, must have been moving, passionate exhortation, with the fervency of a revivalist. This was not the ministry of a servant of God that they were used to; this was a call to “Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the Lord’s hand the cup of His anger. . . . Behold, I have taken out of your hand the cup of reeling; the chalice of My anger; you will never drink it again” (Isa. 51:17, 22).

a. Let us no longer be a reproach, v. 17.

First, there is implicit here years of scorn, of suppression that seem to have maintained a pessimistic, downcast lifestyle. A new generation has accepted this as the norm; it is disgraceful! Second there is the recollection of better days, a reminder by Nehemiah of the earlier history of Israel, of former glory and the blessing of God. This is certainly the need of America today. First, we have a generation in our churches that are ignorant of the blessing of God in former days. Our condition today is also disgraceful! Second we need, not resignation to an imminent apocalyptic closure, but a confidence in God to bless His people afresh upon their repentance and earnest seeking of His refreshing presence.

b. Let us arise and build, v. 18.

First Nehemiah gives a personal testimony. He too has known depression, 1:4, yet also astonishing answers to his prayers through King Artaxerxes. He has letters to prove this remarkable turn of events. His very presence is living evidence as well. Here again, 2:2, 4, circumstances are to be used persuasively. Second Nehemiah then seizes the opportunity as he reads the faces of his congregation. Hence, the time to weep and mourn and hide in caves and feel sorry for ourselves is over. Rather, “Let us arise and build.” In another famous speech of Winston Churchill in 1940, when he had been Prime Minister for only three days, he addressed Parliament and offered “blood, toil, tears, and sweat,” he also declared: “You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.” A local church is not a place for mediocrity because according to Ephesians 6 we are at war, and in war mediocrity results in defeat because the enemy is not slow to rise to excellence in his devilish agenda. It is time to “awake,” to “build,” Rom. 13:11-14). It is time to, “strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet” (Heb. 12:12-13). A local church is a military base, with recovery wards; but it is also a building enterprise that requires builders!

3. An ungodly objection, “What is this thing you are doing?” v. 19.

Throughout the Bible, those who were faithful, even successful in their calling to build for God, also encountered vigorous opposition, whether Abraham, Moses, David, Paul, even the Lord Jesus himself. So it is the case here with Nehemiah. The meeting that he addressed in vs. 16-18, probably included traitors like Dathan, Ahithophel, Absalom, Demas, Hymenaeus and Alexander, Judas, etc.

a. The character of the opposition.

They are all representative of historic opponents of pure Judaism involving paganism or a hybrid form with Judaism.

- (1) *Sanballat the Horonite*. This governor of Samaria, with a Babylonian name, may have been imported into Palestine following the Assyrian captivity of northern Israel.
- (2) *Tobiah the Ammonite official/servant*. Perhaps Sanballat’s deputy, he was descended from Lot through immorality with his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38). Together with the Moabites, likewise descended from Lot’s immorality, they were constantly hostile toward Israel.
- (3) *Geshem the Arab*. He was probably the head of a band of Arabs, 4:7, who were descendants of Ishmael, “a wild donkey of a man” (Gen. 16:12), the rival of Isaac.

b. The agenda of the opposition.

- (1) *Their mockery*, irreligious derision, anti-Semitic scorn, probably harped on past defeat, present humiliation, and future desolation.
- (2) *Their discouragement*, stressing lack of resources for the proposed task, incompetency, being forsaken by God, so as to stimulate the paralysis of planning and consequent inactivity.
- (3) *Their proposal*, that 12 years ago previous attempts at worship reform and rebuilding in Jerusalem by Ezra had been stopped according to royal decree (Ezra 4:17-24).

4. A godly rejoinder, “The God of heaven will give us success,” v. 20.

Nehemiah rises to “convince the gainsayer,” that is as a spiritual leader who is “able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9). However, he addresses the godless and thus speaks not of Jehovah, who they do not know, but “the God of heaven,” a familiar, more general Persian expression.

So, “the God of heaven will give success,” and not Dale Carnegie, or Norman Vincent Peale, or Robert Schuller, or Peter Drucker. Again Nehemiah, like a true leader, is not discouraged even when those under him may be tempted to wilt under criticism. Why is this so? He is like Joshua and Caleb who, on encountering giants in the land of promise, were unlike the ten who were overwhelmed by circumstances of dominant paganism. Hence this *majority* despairingly reported, “we became like grasshoppers in our own sight,” and so they caused Israel to weep and grumble. However the *minority* opinion prevailed as they boldly declared, “The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us—a land which flows with milk and honey” (Num. 13:33-14:2). Joshua and Caleb undoubtedly saw much of the land as being religiously decadent; they knew that rebuilding would be an enormous project. Nevertheless their report was optimistic. Why? Because of the focus of Caleb and Joshua upon God. Here is the reason that Nehemiah boldly proclaimed, “The God of heaven will give us success.” His tour of the ruins of Jerusalem left him in no doubt as to the enormity of the task that was ahead. Nevertheless his response is optimistic because he also is focused on God, but specifically the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As Martin Luther has likewise declared.

Did we in our own strength confide,
 our striving
 would be losing;
 Were not the right Man on our side,
 the Man of God’s own choosing:
 Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is He,
 Lord Sabaoth, His name, from age to age the same,
 And He must win the battle.

- a. *The exhortation to be active in building.* Nehemiah has confidence, in a sovereign God, that does not generate inactivity here, yet at the completion of the building there will be acknowledgment of a sovereign God, 12:27-30. To behold God

through the eye of faith and catch a glimpse of His greatness and glory and sovereignty is the greatest of all encouragements to work and toil and labor!

- b. *The exhortation to be consecrated in building.* Yet in the midst of this freedom under God's direction there is to be the constraint of His holy demands. Only the Lord's people, set apart by God, are to be employed in the building of the City of God. The building of the tabernacle in the wilderness was a most holy task; to suggest the participation of pagans would be unthinkable! Material supplies were obtained from Hiram, the King of Tyre, but the actual building was exclusively the work of God's people. How much more so then is the church of the living God to be built with holy hearts and hands. Money may be legitimately solicited, but only from amongst the children of God. There was discipline exercised here. Thus Nehemiah declared of the unholy enemies: "You have no portion [legal share], right or memorial [stake] in Jerusalem."

During the ministry of C. H. Spurgeon, in spite of the growth at the Metropolitan Tabernacle that astonished Victorian London, yet there was vicious opposition from within and without the walls of Zion. Outside the world offered every type of slander and buffoonery, especially from the cultural elite via the press. But within, that is even Calvinistic, biblicist Christianity there were ferocious assaults. One such charge came from a prominent pastor who, while acknowledging Spurgeon's amiableness and politeness, yet added that, "it was by great, very great politeness that the serpent beguiled Eve." He then added that, "I have—*most solemnly have—my doubts* as to the Divine reality of his conversion."¹ To this type of assault there came the response from Spurgeon: "You may say what you like; you may find fault with the matter and manner of my preaching, but God saves souls by it, and I will hold up that fact, like Giant Goliath's head, to show you that, although my preaching is like David's sling and stone, God has thereby gotten the victory."² In spite of the enemies, even as Nehemiah endured, God granted Spurgeon success, and that eventually stopped the mouths of the critics. May God grant us likewise the same quality of success in these days of declension!

C. BOLDNESS IN ORGANIZED BUILDING, 3:1-32

The study of the lives of great saints is highly profitable, whether Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, or Episcopalian. Particularly notable is their productivity born of tireless zeal and personal discipline. There has never been a fruitful workman for the Lord who was lazy! Mrs. Spurgeon writes of her husband: "He was a splendid organizer, and he could find employment suited to the capacity of many individuals with greatly varied qualifications; and while he keep them all busily occupied, he was himself so quick in all his labor that he would probably do single-handed as much as all of them combined could accomplish."³

So with Nehemiah we have a similar man who was able to arouse the listless and depressed amongst God's people to energetic activity, not for its own sake, but rather the cause of the kingdom of God. In 2:20 he declares: "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we

¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, II, p. 38.

² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³ C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, IV, p. 63.

His servants will arise and build.” Then in 3:1-32, like an awakening volcano, like a factory having been shut down during the night that suddenly erupts with noisy productivity in the morning, the people of God rise up to build. And Governor Nehemiah is not directly named in all of this passage!

1. The leadership initiative, v. 1.

Eliashib the high priest takes the initiative in rebuilding the Sheep Gate. This must have generated a great spread of enthusiasm. When the leadership leads, it acts like a trigger. Though Eliashib was not what he ought to be; his priestly lineage was good, 12:10, yet he had connections with Tobiah the Ammonite that injected problems, 13:4-9; he still harbored unholy alliances that Nehemiah forbade.

2. The infectious activity.

So the enthusiasm spread throughout Jerusalem. This was not activity for the sake of activity. Often in churches the emphasis is simply upon doing something, almost doing anything. The main thing is participation. But what really counts is *why* we are doing what we are doing. So often our answer will simply be for the cause of self or dogoodism. Why then the major emphasis here upon the walls and gates, vs. 1, 3, 6, 8, 13, 14, 15, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32. Why? Think about it!

3. The division of labor.

The actual employment here seems to have included a great variety of talented individuals. In other words, the rebuilding of the City of God required people with different gifts, even as Paul makes so abundantly clear when he uses the analogy of the human body to describe the harmonious working of members in a local church (I Cor. 12:4-27). A similar portrayal is given in Ephesians 4:16, except that there is greater emphasis on productive interaction, resulting in “the growth of the body.” Here is an Old Testament illustration of that principle.

- a. *Appointed gifts* were employed (Priests, Levites, district officials, temple servants, v. 26).
- b. *Learned gifts* were employed (tradesmen, the union of goldsmiths being wealthy and assigned to a large section of the wall, vs. 8, 31, the union of perfumers dealing in spices, ointments, v. 8, merchants).
- c. *Natural gifts* were employed (fathers and sons and brothers and daughters, v. 12).

4. The priority of walls and gates.

Again, why is there such an emphasis upon the walls and gates of Jerusalem? First, because this is the City of God, His earthly dwelling place (Ps. 9:13-14; 60:18; 87:2; 122:1-7; Isa. 26:1-2; 60:18). The temple has been completed and dedicated; God dwells with His people; yet the city is open to enemies, pagans, all and sundry; it is not a holy, sacred city. Hence building fortifications are necessary to hallow God’s earthly residence. And a local church is to be likewise hallowed because it is, “the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (I Tim.

3:15). Second, there is emphasis on walls and gates for supportive reasons, which all apply to the local church.

- a. Gates are necessary to regulate the entrance by the world.

There will be visitors, seekers, the weary, the heavy-laden, but they are not to bring with them the wares and agenda of the world, only faith and repentance. Hence, this City has “walls and ramparts for security . . . that the righteous nation may enter, the one that remains faithful” (Isa. 26:1-2).

- b. Gates are necessary to regulate exit to the world.

There will be the need for citizens of the City of God to have some conversation and commerce with the world (I Cor. 9-10). In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan tells us that it was mandatory for pilgrims to transit through Vanity Fair. Yet in the Town of Vanity there was found a small fellowship of authentic pilgrims.

- c. Walls are necessary to regulate the purity of the saints.

There will be the need for the protection of the saints by means of a preserved holiness. Therefore there must be the erection of standards that determine boundaries that cannot be breached, especially the four pillars of Acts 2:42, “the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

- d. Walls are necessary to resist the assaults of enemies.

There will be the need to resist the attacks of the enemy that so detests what the City of God represents. The Church of Jesus Christ is not a retirement center, but a fortress, a citadel, and “the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matt. 16:18), even though,

’Mid toil and tribulation,
And tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation
Of peace for evermore.

Like the Palace Beautiful in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the faithful local church needs an armory within its safe walls where pilgrims are well equipped before descending to the Valley of Humiliation to face combat with Apollyon. By this means, “the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death” (Rev. 12:10-11). Further, with strong walls, the citizens of the City of God have something firm to stand upon and fight. Walls with breaches, cracks, bring the invasion of the enemy (Isa. 30:13, but cf. 58:12).

CHAPTER III

HOW SHOULD THE PEOPLE OF GOD BUILD? WITH THE DEFEAT OF DISCOURAGEMENT

Nehemiah 4:1-7:73a

IN Arnold Dallimore's excellent short biography of Spurgeon, he has one chapter entitled, "Daily Life in the Great Church," which includes the following: "The Metropolitan Tabernacle was not, as some have assumed, merely a highly popular preaching center. . . . Apart from the sick and infirm, there were very few who came only on Sundays. There were activity and work that brought great numbers to the Tabernacle on many occasions during the week."¹ Only this week I received from that same Metropolitan Tabernacle a leaflet promoting this year's School of Theology which has for its theme, "Restoring Commitment to Service." It explains the reason why: "Many pastors comment on the difficulties they encounter because few believers seem willing to undertake any serious and regular burden of labor for the Lord. Over the last forty years a remarkable shift of outlook has taken place, so that Christian service is no longer seen as a fundamental duty of discipleship. . . . In the case of many believers, the discovery of reformed doctrine has excited new passions along with a less happy side-effect – namely, a loss of interest in practical service."

However it is obvious that Nehemiah was able to rise above such lethargy which he encountered upon returning to Jerusalem from Assyrian captivity. Further, not only did he stimulate a resurgence of faithful building of the City of God, but also he successfully resisted waves, cycles of opposition that involved conspiracy, discouragement, and subterfuge.

A. THE ENCOUNTER WITH CONSPIRACY, 4:1-9

Without exception, the saints of the Old and New Testaments faced recurring conflict that can be linked to concerted opposition. Just think of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel, all of the apostles including Paul. Again think of notable Christians throughout the centuries. It is not that they merely encountered unfavorable circumstances, but evil opposition by design. Again consider Paul, and men making vows to put him to death (Acts 23:12-15), or the purported hostility toward Bunyan and Spurgeon which yet they valiantly and victoriously opposed. So also with Nehemiah.

1. The design of conspiracy.

It should not go unnoticed that there is intentional anti-Semitism here, like Ishmael in conflict with Isaac, Esau in conflict with Jacob, even as there is some parallel with modern anti-Christianity.

¹ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon*, p. 153.

a. Ridicule, vs. 1-3.

The professed faith of the Jews is tolerated by Sanballat and Tobiah, under the heel of repression. But what riles the opposition to the point of animosity is resultant fruit based upon that belief. How contradictory it is that the Jews are derided as being “feeble,” yet they are obviously building with increasing success. The homosexual lobby becomes most aggressive when the opposition is fruitful, especially in the conversion of homosexuals. The world around us is most disturbed when biblical Christianity is effectual. Faithfulness in individual and corporate Christian witness, that has authentic results, will produce inevitable opposition

b. Contention, vs. 7-8.

Again, it is evident success that riles a whole catalog of opponents who are so intensely anti-God, “Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites.” They want Jerusalem to remain in ruins; they want the truth to be on view as decrepit, an anachronism worthy only of being jeered at; they want the morality of a holy God to be paraded as outmoded, discredited, scorned. But when this truth of a holy God produces holy results, then the response is “anger,” a united campaign to “fight against Jerusalem,” to render the work of God as ineffectual, to humiliate it. But true biblical Christianity, through Prince Emmanuel, has always repulsed and confounded such assaults by Prince Diabolus.

2. The defeat of conspiracy.

The opposition has had its own success, to a degree, since Nehemiah confesses that some of the builders have been “demoralized,” v. 5. They have felt the sting of mockery, they have increasingly recalled a history of past desolation and lost sight of a future vision. They have been listening more to the voice of critics than to Nehemiah’s preaching. Hence God’s faithful servant resorts to that weapon which Christian, in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, fell back upon when other weapons seemed less effective.

a. Through prayer, vs. 4-5, 9.

First Nehemiah prays himself, v. 4. His prayer is objective, that is it has effectiveness only in terms of to whom he addresses his prayer. Nehemiah’s praying is not based upon a trust in prayer but rather “our God,” v. 4. This is the only true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who he addressed when captive in Shushan, the “LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments” 1:5.

Second Nehemiah prays for a righteous cause, vs. 4-5, that is the fact that these enemies are in fact opposing God when he pleads: “[L]et not their sin be blotted out before You,” v. 5. Thus the restoration of Jerusalem, the completion of the walls and gates, will be for the vindication of God, 12:27.

Third Nehemiah prays with the saints, v. 9, and this seems to result in direction being given that causes them, “to set up a guard against them day and night.”

This praying leads to discernment, the awareness that they are vulnerable during the night when no work is in progress. So an around-the-clock watch is established.

b. Through perseverance, v. 6.

In spite of ridicule, and fortified by Nehemiah's prayer, vs. 4-5, "the people had a mind to work." They closed all the gaps as a priority, and built the wall up to half of its projected height. Sanballat and Tobiah continued with mockery, v. 3, and still, "the people had a mind to build." Their enthusiasm was unquenchable. They had that spirit of Winston Churchill: "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never - in nothing, great or small, large or petty." Of course in reality this was both resistance and persistence born of the Spirit of God. As Charles Wesley writes:

Surrounded by a host of foes,
 Stormed by a host of foes within,
 Nor swift to flee, nor strong to oppose,
 Single, against hell, earth, and sin,
 Single, yet undismayed, I am:
 I dare believe in Jesu's name.
 What though a thousand hosts engage,
 A thousand worlds, my soul to shake?
 I have a shield shall quell their rage,
 And drive the alien armies back;
 Portrayed it bears a bleeding Lamb:
 I dare believe in Jesu's name.

B. THE ENCOUNTER WITH DISCOURAGEMENT, 4:10-23

When C. H. Spurgeon first published a monthly magazine in January of 1865, it was designed to inform and encourage concerning the ministry of The Metropolitan Tabernacle in London; he named it *The Sword and The Trowel*, being derived from Nehemiah 4:17-18. The subtitle was, "A Record of Combat with Sin and Labor for the Lord." In that first issue he added: "We would ply the Trowel with untiring hand for the building up of Jerusalem's dilapidated walls, and wield the Sword with vigor and valor against the enemies of the truth."² The fact that he had been pastor of this famous church, since 1854, meant that the subsequent eleven years had well taught him the truth that he was not only building for the Lord, but also in combat with the Lord's enemies, even as was Nehemiah.

1. The design of discouragement, vs. 10-12.

Many a worthwhile project starts out with great enthusiasm; however over the long haul it is easy for faithful workers to become dispirited. Paul twice warns about this problem: "Let us not lose heart in doing good" (Gal. 6:9; II Thess. 3:13), where *ἐγκακέω*, *egkakeō*, means to give in to evil, to faint under pressure, to lose heart. In other words, the enemy is relentless so that the child of God wilts under constant

² C. H. Spurgeon, ed., *The Sword and The Trowel*, 1865-1867, p. 2.

attacks. John Bunyan relates in *Grace Abounding*: “Then hath the tempter come upon me, also with such discouragements as these—You are very hot for mercy, but I will cool you; this frame shall not last always; many have been as hot as you for a spirit, but I have quenched their zeal. . . . I will cool you insensibly, by degrees, by little and little. What care I, saith he, though I be seven years in chilling your heart if I can do it at last?”³ Three Satanic strategies in particular are now used against Nehemiah and his associates.

a. The indirect threat of failing strength, v. 10.

There seems to have come almost a taunting song in the suburbs of Jerusalem as well as the urban center, and that sung by the flagging builders, not the enemies. In pressing themselves very hard, the results were not so productive as they might have hoped. An excessive work-load and sleep deprivation will weary and depress the human spirit. Even John Owen admitted that, if he had his life to live over again, he would not have taxed himself quite so severely. The downcast attitude seems to have come from two perspectives; first, a sense of being overwhelmed by the amount of rubbish that needed to be cleaned out; second, a vision of the whole wall that needed to be rebuilt, rather than ones specific allocation. At seminary, one professor wisely advised: “Barry, don’t think too much about what you have to accomplish in three years; rather, just focus on one semester at a time.”

b. The direct threat of ambush, v. 11.

Here the actual enemies have been overheard in their plotting of a surprise attack. Probably Sanballat and Tobiah have learned of the toll that the extreme efforts of the Jews is extracting. To catch them unawares will result in a slow reaction. But the intention here is not a mere crippling of the Jews, but their slaughter. And this is the present design of many Arab nations. Hence the effect is relentless anxiety amongst God’s people, that is when they concentrate on this prospect more than God’s hovering providence. Rather, “Be anxious for nothing, . . . and the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7). Yet this does not exclude our responsibility for giving attention to our physical health and rest.

c. The direct threat of being surrounded, v. 12.

Some Jews in outlying areas, probably mingling in the region of Samaria where Sanballat was located, have heard of plans for an assault by the enemy based on the strategy of overwhelming, surrounding strength. They are like those who give more attention to the discovery of heresy, liberalism, rather than greater interest in the truth. As a result they tend to be downcast, pessimistic, believing more in conspiracy, in immanent tragedy, than the triumph of the promises of God. So frightened have the listening Jews become that they have given a warning at least ten times, with trembling, of inside information! Perhaps this is psychological

³ John Bunyan, *Works*, II, § 110, p. 19.

strategy on the part of the enemy as well. But how discouraging this would be to the wall builders.

2. The defeat of discouragement, vs. 13-23.

However, as representative of true leadership, Nehemiah is not discouraged. He holds the reins and will not let them go; in fact he pulls them in even more tightly so as to correct wandering and stumbling.

a. Strengthening of the ranks, v. 13.

The threat of enemy attack is not discounted; rather the weakest sections of the wall are bolstered up with family reinforcements, every member participation, and necessary weapons of warfare, “swords, spears, and bows.” So a local church is to bolster its ranks with “the full armor of God” (Eph. 6:10-17).

b. Strengthening with exhortation, v. 14.

Another mark of Nehemiah’s leadership is his perception of the present spiritual health of God’s people and his prescription of an appropriate remedy. His diagnosis is “fear/anxiety,” while his medication is a dose of a clearer vision of the glory of God: “Remember the LORD who is great and awesome.” He had applied this same medicine to himself in 1:4-5. Nehemiah focused on the character of God, a recollection of His covenant faithfulness and sovereignty. C. H. Spurgeon well appreciated this principle, even at the commencement of his ministry in 1855:

Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your tears? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in His immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.⁴

c. Strengthening with sword and trowel, vs. 15-18.

So the enemy suffers a setback at noticing the revived spirit of God’s people, v. 15. But Nehemiah further recognizes the diversity of gifts among the people of God. Some are better at a defensive ministry, v. 16, some are better at building, v. 17, though even the builders must have a defensive ability, v. 18a. And then there was a separately gifted trumpeter who could rally all of the people of God at Nehemiah’s command, v. 18b. It is the smooth operation of the differing members of the body that results in “the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16).

⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *New Park Street Pulpit*, I, p. 16 (Ages CD).

d. Strengthening with consolidation, vs. 19-20.

All of the people of God are comforted with a sense of unity in this “work [that] is great and extensive,” even though they are not all close by. A sense of interdependency is stimulated, by means of the trumpet sound as a rallying call. But further, the powerful exhortation of Nehemiah continues: “Our God will fight for us.” This did not cause them to quit working, but to work all the more vigorously and confidently.

e. Strengthening with vigilance, v. 21-23.

- (1) *From sunrise to sunset*, they “walk [and work] circumspectly, . . . redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15-17, KJV), v. 21.
- (2) *From sunset to sunrise*, during the darkness, they retreat to the security that is “within Jerusalem,” (Ps. 122:6-7), v. 22.
- (3) *From sunrise to sunrise*, they remained dressed for war, not relaxation, with hands on their swords (Eph. 6:17), v. 23.

C. THE ENCOUNTER WITH CARNALITY, 5:1-19

If you are a biblical Christian, the renewed, spiritually healthy heart will have an inclination toward godliness; nevertheless, the flesh will solicit carnal behavior. If you are not a Christian, the unrenewed heart will have an inclination toward self, personal advancement, approbation, pleasure, the lusts of the body, that may, however, be restrained by a family and church environment. When given freedom, the flesh of the unbeliever will direct his willing steps along worldly, man-centered paths. However, even the Christian will sometimes yield, though with inevitable grief, to the overtures of the flesh, and when such religious lusting and self-indulgence takes place in a local church, building efforts and the life of the fellowship suffer. Paul addresses this problem within the church at Corinth when he writes: “For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?” (I Cor. 3:3). Do we today walk like “mere men ? Not surprisingly, the church at Corinth suffered.

Nehemiah faced similar problems amongst the children of God some 500 years before Paul. Yet there is much similarity concerning, not only the difficulties Nehemiah faced as well as those of Paul, but also those we face today at Christian Fellowship Church!

1. The design of carnality, vs. 1-5.

One of the subtle features of carnality is that it often concerns itself with legitimate needs. Consider four areas of our daily lives that necessarily consume much of our attention, namely food, housing, taxation, and family matters. Nehemiah also found himself caught up in these timeless, valid human concerns. However, they very much impinged upon the priority of laboring in the spiritual arena, that is the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and for us the local church.

Up to this point Nehemiah's opposition has come from Sanballat, Tobiah, and their pagan associates. But now in v. 1 strife erupts within the people of God. There is dissension between "the people and their wives," probably the poorer rural class, and "their Jewish brothers," the more affluent citizens of Jerusalem. Most likely commercial relationships with secular traders had now become strained, even severed. There is nothing like poverty and material lack to really test our spiritual status. So we now find this internal conflict described in detail concerning matters that are timeless.

a. Food, v. 2.

Hunger has developed amongst the poorer classes because the rebuilding of Jerusalem has resulted in an economic squeeze. Trading with the enemy, and then making a breach, has reaped consequences. Some have hardly enough to eat, while others continue to tour the local restaurants. The early church faced this same problem, and dealt with it (Acts 6:1-5; cf. James 2:1-7).

b. Housing, v. 3.

A severe economic recession has brought about bankruptcy and foreclosure on property on many true believers. Some realize on their possessions simply to by bread. There is no welfare here, although the law was specific at this point (Deut. 15:7-11). Others are quite solvent, indeed they hardly feel the pinch, and show little interest in the needs of their poorer brethren.

c. Taxation, v. 4.

Levies from foreign overlords, such as the Persians, could be severe, as 9:36-37 indicates. So when personal revenue dwindles, the taxes still have to be paid. Believers here are like those who have their investments in internet and computer stock. Suddenly the value drops by 75%, but remaining large tax bills have to a paid so that a person is financially wiped out. Now they are ignored by friends!

d. Family, v. 5.

The families of poor believers, their property having been confiscated, are being forced to subject their children to servitude under the demands of the wealthy brethren. Now if, "our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers," how can such harsh treatment be possible? Thus family concerns, and the other inequities regarding food, housing, and taxation, present a very real problem that is not to be brushed aside. Carnality is widespread. Nehemiah must intervene.

2. The defeat of carnality, vs. 6-19.

Here is a matter of injustice amongst the children of God that ought not to be. Rightly, Nehemiah is "very angry/fuming" after the manner of the Psalmist: "Burning indignation has seized me because of the wicked who forsake Your law" (Ps. 119:53). In the midst of earnest labor for the right cause of God, there is indifference to pressing personal needs!

- a. The necessity of condemnation, vs. 7-11.

Nehemiah is a great preacher who presses home his censure with mouth stopping force. He is also a thinker who first “takes counsel/muses with himself,” and concludes that a public hearing is necessary. Simply put, he argues that if you have redeemed some of your brethren from pagan servitude, how then can you enslave them amongst yourselves? If God has redeemed His people from slavery, how then can His people enslave one another. Such an attitude is shameful, as if committing spiritual cannibalism. This is no example of your faith before the nations! Hence, make restitution, show mercy, deal kindly, show compassion.

- b. The necessity of confession, v. 12.

The Spirit of God obviously works in the hearts of the affluent; their carnality is readily acknowledged; restitution is volunteered with such earnest intent that a vow, a covenant is made.

- c. The necessity of leadership example, vs. 14-19.

A faithful man of God will always search his heart concerning the words he speaks, his ministry of the Word. He will be struck by Paul’s concern: “Who is adequate for these things? II Cor. 2:16).

- (1) Godly leadership calls for commitment, v. 13.

Nehemiah then takes the lead by example and declares: “I also shook out the front of my garment,” as a symbolic gesture indicating that he personally had nothing to hide or keep back from those in need. But further, he required that everyone else have the same attitude. All need a shake-down! As a result they repented and proclaimed “Amen! [and] praised the LORD.” They rejoiced in discipline!

- (2) Godly leadership does not take advantage, vs. 14-15.

How did Nehemiah gain the respect of the people that led to this repentance? He was like Paul who, although qualified to receive monetary support, yet worked as a tentmaker so as to avoid the charge of being a religious carpetbagger (I Cor. 9:1-14; I Thess. 2:9-12; II Thess. 3:7-9). He never accepted a privileged stipend as a governor or ate in the executive dining room. Why? Because he feared God and sought His provision amongst the people. Nehemiah’s goal was the restored glory of God in Jerusalem, not self-aggrandizement!

- (3) Godly leadership does what it asks, vs. 16-17.

Thus Nehemiah worked on the walls himself, along with his servants. He was more concerned about repairs to God’s honor than personal comfort and acquisition.

(4) Godly leadership does not indulge itself, vs. 18-19.

Even Nehemiah's food was that of the common people, though he could have dined more exclusively. Here was a man who forsook carnality as an example to his flock, but chiefly for the cause of Jerusalem, the City of God. For he prays: "Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people." This is not the cry of a man bargaining for his soul, but rather a child of God pleading for outpoured blessing in the midst of a great struggle. It is the very opposite of carnality, rather selfless devotion, one holy passion for the glory of God.

D. THE ENCOUNTER WITH SUBTERFUGE, 6:1-7:73.

It has been said that desperate times call for desperate measures. Certainly this principle holds true for the enemies of the kingdom of God. Hence when the faithful children of God persevere, when they don't buckle under devilish temptation, then in exasperation the enemy resorts to extreme methods. Sanballat and Tobiah have now reached that point of frustration whereby they know that Nehemiah is succeeding in his rebuilding endeavors; they observe the evidence of progress; hence they are being pressed into making reckless plans, and retreat.

Satan operates this way as well. Christ's uncompromising resistance at his temptation, by the devil's subterfuge in the wilderness, led to his retreat. James 4:7 puts this strategy in a broad context: "Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." There is described Nehemiah's strategy in a nutshell, in positive and negative terms. Positively, he has constantly trusted in God's gracious providence, 1:4-11; 2:4, 12, 20; 4:4, 8-9, 20; 5:9, 13, 19. Negatively, he has just as faithfully resisted pagan opposition, 2:19-20; 4:3-4, 8-9, 15-18. Hence the enemy, in acknowledging considerable failure, now resorts to subterfuge, that is underhand deceit.

1. The design of subterfuge, 6:1-14.

Remember that in 4:3 Tobiah mocked concerning the wall: "If a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down." Then Nehemiah responded: "So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height," 4:6. But now he reports that, "I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates," v. 1. In spite of the enemies of God, the work progresses to near completion, and the enemies are troubled.

a. A plot to harm Nehemiah, 6:1-4.

So Sanballat and his friends concoct a subtle scheme. He appears to want to negotiate in weakness while having a hidden and treacherous agenda. He is like David's "familiar friend; we who had sweet fellowship together walked in the house of God in the throng. . . . His speech was smoother than butter, but his heart was war; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords" (Ps. 55:13-14, 21).

The invitation here is with a tone of conciliation: "Come let us meet together," that is at a distance from Jerusalem. But it was not a brilliant suggestion;

Nehemiah could read between the lines; further he had too much security in the City of God. So the attempt at isolation and obviously assassination was transparently clear. Rather this man of God triumphantly asserted: "I am doing a great work and cannot come down!" v. 3. A right godly perspective overcomes collaboration with the enemy, and resulting assaults.

However, like the persistence of Delilah, though here unsuccessful, they pleaded with Nehemiah four times, doubtless using every form of bribe, every imaginable twist in deceitful language. But it was to no avail.

b. A plot to discredit Nehemiah, 6:5-9.

Then there was delivered a fifth letter that had a more ominous and threatening tone about it. It suggests that Nehemiah is not only planning a revolt against King Artaxerxes, but also he has arranged for phony prophets to call for his appointment as King of Judah. So using intimidation, Nehemiah is challenged to negotiate, or else a bad report will be delivered to the King of Persia, vs. 5-7.

Nehemiah replies with a strait denial; he also declares that Sanballat's charges are a fabrication, that the real intent was to destroy the loyalty of the people of Jerusalem toward its governor. Besides, surely Nehemiah still retained the letters of authority he had obtained from King Artaxerxes; these would uphold his integrity. Nevertheless, his final resort is to prayer yet once again: "But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

c. A plot to shame Nehemiah, 6:10-14.

So if Nehemiah will not be drawn out to be snared by the enemy, then the enemy will infiltrate Jerusalem with an apostate named Shemaiah, a priest and a prophet, who professes piety and concern! In fact this inhabitant of Jerusalem is an agent of Sanballat and Tobiah. He suggests that, on account of a plot prophetically revealed, Nehemiah should take refuge in the temple, in the Court of the Priests, where it was unlawful for a laymen to enter. Shemaiah rationalizes why this is acceptable in this instance.

But Nehemiah is not deceived; a holy God does not engage His prophets in unholy suggestions; so he will not antagonize the priesthood; neither will he run for cover appearing frightened, or act unlawfully before the people. Yet again he prays, "O my God," delivering his enemies, who are in fact God's enemies, into the court of divine retribution!

2. The defeat of subterfuge, 6:15-7:73.

Here then with Nehemiah, as with any productive saint over the course of human history, there is inevitable conflict with the enemies of God. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan distinguishes between two authentic pilgrims, Little-Faith, and Great Grace who is the King's Champion. Yet we are told that even the King's Champion has scars and cuts on his face as a result of combat with Beelzebub. But now, apart from Nehemiah's frequent praying, what is the answer to these many assaults and conspiracies?

- a. Through perseverance in building (lasting concentration), 6:15-19.

Nothing short of completion of God's appointed task will suffice. Hence, there is endurance, born of godly vision, that never gives in. On account of this attitude, "the wall was completed.;" As a result the enemies were confounded; "they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of God." And all of this had been accomplished in spite of treasonable correspondence between Tobiah and disloyal Jewish nobles in Judah, vs. 17-19.

- b. Through the sealing of the city (costly consecration), 7:1-4.

With the walls completed, the gates are hung so that Jerusalem might now be a separate community, a sacred city (Isa. 52:1). To further this long anticipated goal, godly appointments are now made, Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, and Hananiah, "a faithful man [who] feared God more than many." Further, gate-opening when "the sun is hot," not merely at sun-rise, only further ensured security. Thus Jerusalem/Zion had again become what God had originally intended; "The LORD builds up Jerusalem; . . . Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion" (Ps. 147:2, 12; cf. 122:1-9).

Yet there was a cost involved: "Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few and the houses were not built." Nevertheless, how different this state is from that earlier time, following the return of the first contingent from Babylon, when Haggai complained: "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate? Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Consider your ways!'" (Hag. 1:4-5). Here there has been a change of attitude, and the sacrifice has been productive.

It is a trite expression, "no gain without pain," that is nevertheless true, whether in childbirth, body development, fruit tree cultivation that requires pruning, or graduation in law or medicine. So there will be no spiritual growth without cross-bearing, no victory without conflict, no authentic spiritual church growth without spiritual laboring during the construction process, as is amply demonstrated in the life of godly Nehemiah.

- c. Through the census of the children of God, 7:5-69.

We might liken the following accounting to a church membership roll which serves the purpose of defining who are the authentic, committed children of God. Here is a list, first recorded in Ezra 2:1-70, which details: "The sons of the people of Israel," vs. 6-38, "the Priests," vs. 39-42, "the Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants," vs. 43-56, "sons of the servants of Solomon," vs. 57-60, "miscellaneous," vs. 61-65, totaling 49,942, vs. 66-69. As Paul instructed the unruly church at Corinth, "All things [in the fellowship of God's household] must be done properly and in an orderly manner" (I Cor. 14:40).

- d. Through the contributions of the children of God, 7:70-73a.

From Ezra 2:68 we learn that the material generosity of prominent leaders amongst the children of God was, “offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation.”

But of what use is a securely walled city without God-honoring worship? Of what use is a local church, well ordered, with good location and facilities, if the supreme matter of true worship is wanting? Without it, surely the enemy will eventually gain the day. But with it, the enemy will be expelled, 13:4-9; 13:28.

But from where does true worship emanate? What is its foundation, its legitimate and illegitimate forms, its focus? The following section in Nehemiah indicates the priority of the Word of God.

CHAPTER IV

HOW SHOULD THE PEOPLE OF GOD WORSHIP? IN TRUTH AND IN SPIRIT

Nehemiah 7:73b-10:39

A. With the Proclamation of the Word of God, 7:73b-8:8.

One of the indelible results of my own conversion was a thirst for the Word of God, to hear it expounded, to read good books about it. So Peter writes: “Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (I Pet. 2:2). So the people of God in Judea surrounding Jerusalem had the same healthy desire and expectations.

1. The *expectation* of the Word by the people, v. 1.

Here in this verse are four timeless principles that apply as much today as they did in Nehemiah’s time concerning the vital role of spiritual nourishment by means of the Word of God in the assembly of God’s people. We liken the scene here to a local church today that seeks to call a faithful pastor for the prime purpose of proclaiming the Word of God. The four principles are: 1. The *Cohesive Principle* of Unity. 2. The *Human Principle* of Appetite. 3. The *Shepherding Principle* of a Suitable Preacher. 4. The *Divine Principle* of Word Priority.

a. The *Cohesive Principle* of unity.

“All the people gathered as one man.” There is agreement amongst the gathered people of God. They are not distracted with music, social issues, building concerns, etc. There is an agreed priority. Further, they appreciate that as it is not good to eat alone, as it were, so they prefer spiritually to dine in company and discuss what they are digesting. Hence it is good to hear the Word of God in fellowship, and not just by means of the radio and tapes. In the New Testament, preaching is usually to a multitude. Paul’s analogy of the Body of Christ suggests the feeding of interrelated members (I Cor. 12:12-27).

b. The *Human Principle* of an appetite.

The people here were not, as Thomas Manton describes, with “bodies together but minds scattered throughout the four corners of the earth.” Rather they were like Job who declared: “I have treasured the words of His (God’s) mouth more than my necessary food” (Job 23:12). Revival is always marked with a renewed interest in the preached Word. Those who have been saved by the truth of God will inevitably thirst for that same truth in larger measure. The absence of this desire at best indicates illness, and at worst illegitimacy! The attitude of the early church (Acts 4:31-32; Phil. 1:27; 2:2) was that of the whole of Psalm 119, such as:

“I shall delight in your statutes; . . . I long for your precepts; . . . how I love Your testimonies; . . . I rejoice at Your word!” vs. 16, 40, 119, 162.

- (1) They want the Word of God for all of their families, v. 2.
- (2) They want long drafts of the Word of God, not mere whiffs and sniffs, v. 3.
- (3) They want exposition of the full spectrum of the Word of God, not imposition, v. 5, 8.
- (4) They want heartfelt worship of God, not prim and proper religion, vs. 6.
- (5) They want to meet before God so that they might be reconciled to Him, 9:1-3.

Remember that these people have not long ago been exposed to the most sophisticated culture in all of the world, namely that of Babylon. For over seventy years they have been exposed to its politics, architecture, religion, food, fashions, music. But these baubles have not touched the spiritual void in their souls. They have watched Babylon reach the heights under Nebuchadnezzar. Then under Belshazzar, how the mighty have fallen! They recall a better heritage. Now their hearts crave for food from heaven.

I hunger and I thirst;
 Jesus my manna be;
 Ye living waters, burst
 Out of the rock for me.
 Thou bruised and broken Bread,
 My life-long wants supply;
 As living souls are fed,
 O feed me or I die.
 Thou true life-giving Vine,
 Let me Thy sweetness prove;
 Renew my life with Thine,
 Refresh my soul with love.
 Rough paths my feet have trod,
 Since first their course began;
 Feed me, Thou Bread of God;
 Help me, Thou Son of Man.
 For still the desert lies
 My thirsting soul before;
 O living waters, rise
 Within me evermore.

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c. The *Shepherding Principle* of a suitable preacher.

As sheep desire a shepherd who provides satisfying nourishment, so the people of God, under Governor Nehemiah, express their preference for a faithful minister of the truth of God. So, “they asked Ezra the priest to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.” Empty food closets heighten the desire for good food. So seventy years of hunger in Babyon, through the discipline of spiritual deprivation, resulted in longing for the truth of God.

Hence the people of God knew what they were looking for; it had to be someone well qualified in the Word of God, not a new convert, but able to teach, to accurately handle the Word of truth, and hold fast the faithful Word with both exhortation and refutation (I Tim. 3:2, 6; II Tim. 2:15; Tit. 1:9). There was one name that immediately stood out, and that was Ezra the scribe.

The reputation of Ezra was such that he was identified as a man zealous for the Book of God. He was probably allowed to be set apart in this regard while others had been rebuilding the walls. Now a man gifted in expounding the Scripture is desired, recognized, and called. Ezra is that man, the first of a school of scribes, “learned in the law,” and not simply a transcriptionist. Subsequently the Jews regarded him as a “second Moses.”¹ However his priority was the Word of God, in harmony with being spiritually gifted, and the people wanted it that way, and as a result revival appears to break out, 9:1-3.

d. The *Divine Principle* of Word priority.

There was also recognition that this written revelation was, “the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.” This was not merely religious instruction, but God Himself speaking from heaven through a consecrated human spokesman. This was not the traditions of the fathers, human commentary. This was the unique, inscripturated truth of God. With this being the understanding of both Ezra and the people, then his preaching and the hearing of the people was catalytic. Here was proclaimed and heard transcendent truth that had compelling, converting authority, as 9:1-3 proves.

2. The *exhibition* of the Word through reading, vs. 2-6.

Hence Ezra yields to the call of the people, “as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, [willing to] accurately handle the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15). In the midst of business and neglect, the people had known of the Book of God’s existence. But Ezra, probably along with the support of Nehemiah, has told the preoccupied people of their spiritual ignorance. Hence he now brings out the Word of God to an agreeable people whose thirst has been aroused. All the wall-building activity in the world cannot satisfy a starved soul.

Now while exposition is implicit here, as v. 8 indicates, yet to begin with the emphasis is upon the public reading of the Word of God, as was the case with the Apostle Paul (I Tim. 4:13). Jewish tradition tells us that Ezra designed a scheme for annual and

¹ Louis Ginsberg, *Legends of the Bible*, pp. 642-5.

Sabbath readings in synagogues; he ordered additional schools for the instruction of children in Scripture. So here, the public reading of the Word of God is of fundamental importance, though a number of related factors are to be considered concerning this sacred duty.

a. The corporate factor, v. 2.

The people of God are to gather and collectively hear the Word of God before it is expounded. Hence it is to be read well; all of it is to be read, book by book, even as we endeavor to do at Christian Fellowship Church, both Old Testament and New Testament. Thus before you hear the preached Word, you have heard the read Word and are accountable. Exposition is illuminating; but the reading of the Word is the most pure proclamation.

b. The time factor, v. 3a.

Here the ministry of the Word was, “from early morning until midday,” that is from sunrise till noon, approximately six hours. Consider Paul at Ephesus, daily ministering the Word from “11:00 am to 4:00 pm” in the lecture-hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9).² The point is that this ministry was serious, substantial, certainly matching in concentrated interest the hours that we can spend before television or at some sporting event. Here was no complaining at the length of the sermon, no repeatedly looking at ones watch, no sense of boredom, no craving for entertainment!

c. The comprehension factor, v. 3b.

Here is no mere adult gathering, but “men, women and all who could listen with understanding;” the result is that “all the people were attentive to the book of the law.” Thus “sons and daughters,” 10:28, are included, and implicit is the need of nursery care for children who cannot understand. But surely children going to school at the age of five indicates that understanding has commenced. And it should be appreciated that understanding comprehends not only the truth that is read, but also the whole solemn aura of the gathering, the fact that God is present.

d. The architectural factor, v. 4a.

“Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose.” Surely it was elevated for good visibility, and there was also the availability of suitable seating, v. 5. Hence there is a place for a good facility that suits the purpose of the preached Word. Architectural features do have a place, that consider the need of convenient location, heating, good acoustics, suitable seating, teaching rooms, fellowship meals, nursery facilities, parking, etc.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles (Greek Text)*, p. 356.

- e. The discipleship factor, v. 4b.

Although Ezra is the senior preacher, he has fellow elders at his side in support. Further he shepherds certain associates who in turn share in the preaching ministry, vs. 7-8. Here the people sense the unity in purpose of the leadership and thus follow with enthusiasm.

- f. The reverence factor, v. 5.

Then, “Ezra opened the book,” or spread out the scroll. As a result “all the people stood up.” It seems to have been a spontaneous action. Here was an acknowledgment of reverence, of humiliation. In Aberdeen, Scotland, many years ago, I attended a church where the Bible was brought into the congregation placed on a velvet cushion, in the front of a procession followed by the preacher. At that point, all the people stood up. They also stood up at the reading of the Word.

- g. The response factor, v. 6.

But what is the response to this reading of the Word, and its exposition? It is with *voice* (“Amen, Amen! being agreement), *hands* (directed as holy toward the holy place, Ezra 9:5; Ps. 24:3-4; 28:2; 134:2; I Tim. 2:1-2, 8), *knees* (bowed in humiliation), and *faces* (with worshipful acknowledgment). Here was reaction to truth, not an attempt to engage the truth by these forms. Here is the right response to the preached Word; the total person in single focus on God’s holy revelation.

3. The *extension* of the Word through delegation, v. 7.

Standing in the shadow of a great man there is much to be gained. In fact in the realm of learning how to proclaim the Word there is no substitute. Surely the apostles learned this way. Hence true preaching is “more caught than taught.” So when I heard Dr. Lloyd-Jones preach in London, then I recognized the real thing, not some mechanical style learned looking at a mirror or reading a textbook on public speaking. So Ezra was an exceptional model for thirteen pastoral associates. When in Babylon, their master had been the equivalent of Minister of State for Jewish Affairs. He was probably the founder of the synagogue system in Judah; most likely he was instrumental in the formation of the Old Testament canon of Scripture. Tradition tells us he wrote I and II Chronicles and Psalm 119. He was one of the most learned men in the Old Testament. Hence this only confirms his singular passion, that is the communication of the Word of God; this is confirmed in Ezra 7:10. “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.” That was said of him over twelve years ago. Now that the temple, walls and gates have been rebuilt, he is at the forefront of the restoration of worship in which the ministry of the Word predominates. For years this senior pastor of Israel has taught by example how to read and expound the Word of God. Now the associate pastors follow in his steps. They “explain the law [Word],” that is they “give understanding” בִּין, bîn; they were able “to discern” the truth of Scripture and communicate it well. Hence understanding in the congregation was their primary goal, not personal status as a preacher. So this proved to be powerful ministry, the same word being used in v. 9 as “teaching.” As a

result this ministry so gripped the attention of the people that they were, “weeping when they heard the words of the law.”

4. The *exposition* of the Word through exegesis, v. 8.

But more specifically, what is the process by which this “explanation” of the Word of God was set forth? Surely it was more than a lecture.

a. It commences with reading.

This was the necessary commencement of the process that required ability based upon prior study. The Scripture is best read when it is well understood by those who read it. The people must hear *exactly* and *only* and *fluently* what God has revealed through the inspired writers. A law is always exactly read at its promulgation; only then is it interpreted by competent judges. This is God’s composition, God’s vocabulary which must first be acknowledged; it must be definitively proclaimed and heard. This leads us to the conclusion that those who read had a high view of the text they proclaimed; they were not liberals. As James Montgomery Boice wrote years ago: “There has never been a great expository preacher who has not held this high conviction [concerning the absolute authority of the Word of God]; there have been pulpiteers who have not, but never expositors.”³

b. It continues with explanation.

Having read the Word, they were “translating to give the sense,” that is “making distinctly clear” פָּרַשׁ, *pârash*, the Scripture so that it might “make sense” שׂוּמ, *sûwm*. Here the emphasis is upon the explanation of the message. In other words, exact recitation was followed by exposition. The intent was to “expose” the Author’s intended meaning, to “lead out of the text,” (John 1:18, ἐξηγέομαι, *exē geomai*), “to exegete” so as to declare what the Bible means by what it says. Basically, God has a singular, fixed meaning, not levels of meaning that are conditioned by contemporary circumstances. Write your own book, and then consider how you would feel if a subsequent reviewer interpreted your writing contrary to your intention! You would object, and so does God when man gives “imposition” to His Word, not “exposition.” For this reason, a faithful pastor is to “present [himself . . . to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling, cutting a straight line/furrow in the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15). This whole principle was at the heart of the Reformation, particularly with Luther and Calvin, whereby a basic, original, singular meaning was insisted upon rather than the medieval, Catholic understanding of levels of meaning that suited subjective interpretation.

³ James Montgomery Boice, “The Great Need For Great Preaching,” *Christianity Today*, December 20, 1974, p. 7.

c. It concludes with understanding.

The desired result is that “they [the people] understood the reading,” that is “discerned/comprehended” בִּין, bin, at the “reading convocation,” מִקְרָא, miqrâ. Here the emphasis is upon the embrace, the grasp of the message by the congregation. Here the desire of the preacher goes beyond the mining of the truth, even its plain exposure and his obvious enthusiasm at the glory of the truth. If that was all that was required, he may as well stay in his study. Rather his concern, his hearts desire is that the congregation comprehend and embrace that which the preacher proclaims.

This principle is wonderfully illustrated in the Old Testament when Elisha prophesies that food is imminent when Samaria is besieged by Arameans and experiences cannibalism. Four lepers, just outside the city gate, in desperation decide to visit the Aramean camp and find it deserted. In also finding plenty of food they conclude: “We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, but we are keeping silent; if we wait until morning light, punishment will undertake us. Now therefore come, let us go and tell the king’s household [in Samaria]” (II Kings 7:9). This was the same attitude of Ezra and his associates. The discovery of treasure is not enough; it must be shared. The pastor longs to feed his sheep, and the sheep long to be fed. Now that is spiritual chemistry that ignites the life of a local church. I am more committed than ever. Are you?

B. With the Power of the Word of God, 8:9-10:39.

Perhaps the most common objection to the exposition of the Word of God, with emphasis upon truth and substance and content, is that it is too cerebral, too academic at the expense of neglecting more practical matters. Of course there is a real danger in this regard, though it is not a widespread problem in these times; the need of the hour is on, “what the text means by what it says.” But of course we do not stop at comprehension of information; we build the superstructure of being a Christian upon the foundation of the truth of Scripture.

The ministry of Ezra has certainly focused on the foundational nature of the written Word of God in vs. 1-8 to a degree that we are not accustomed. But the intent has been that a superstructure of godly lives should arise within the assembly of the children of God. And this resultant practicality is plainly evident in 8:9-10:39.

1. Generating holiness, 8:9-12.

Of the several results we notice concerning Ezra’s expository ministry, that which overshadows it all is an emphasis on holiness, of consecration amongst the people of God. *First*, there has already been established a geographic holiness, a holy place for gathering as the people of God, namely Jerusalem now sanctified by restored walls and gates. It represents the structure of a faithful local church that also has gospel walls that distinguish the gathered Christians, and gates that allow access to the world for witness. *Second*, there is a “holy day” whereby the children of God congregate according to a temporal mandate, vs. 9, 11, namely that they not be “forsaking . . . [their] assembling together, as is the habit of some” (Heb. 10:25). But what was this day? According to v. 2, it was not the Sabbath, but “the first day of the seventh month [Tisri],” which festival was probably Rosh ha-shanah, the Feast of Trumpets, the

Jewish New Year, with Sabbath like restrictions (Num. 29:1; Lev. 23:24). Essentially, this then was a day, “holy to the Lord your God.” In other words, the people were to devote a day toward corporate fellowship in the things of God. However here was no legal necessity, but heartfelt desire for a day of fellowship. *Third*, beyond a place and a time, and most important of all, there is a desire for holiness of person, primarily with regard to the soul, though secondarily concerning the body in celebration.

a. *A holy conviction* of the soul, v. 9.

“For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.” Probably the whole of the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses, was read and expounded with great passion and application. But what specifically caused such heart conviction? It was grief at personal disobedience, ignorance, neglect, and lost blessing. Surely the priesthood was just as guilty in holding the Word from the people. Likewise eighteen year old King Josiah of Judah was personally distraught when the book of God, lost in the house of the Lord, was discovered and read to him: “When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes” (II Kings 22:11; 23:1-3). Here was a genuine moving of the Spirit of God that we are so starved of today. And it was also associated with comfort for the truly repentant, by means of pastoral leadership. The agony of the genuinely repentant soul did not have to be prolonged. “Do not mourn or weep.” There was encouragement in assurance of sins forgiven and peace with God.

b. *A holy celebration* of the soul, v. 10.

“Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet.” This proverbial expression undoubtedly exhorts feasting, yet as v. 12 indicates, the conversation was not to be so much about recipes and casseroles, but the “understanding of the Word.” There was also to be a spirit of grace and generosity concerning those who had prepared nothing. “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8). But the preeminent aspect of banqueting here concerned aridness of the soul giving way to the feasting soul. “Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” This was “joy in the Lord.” So there is both weeping and rejoicing in true repentance.

c. *A holy comfort* for the soul, v. 11.

“Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” Here great grief-stricken emotional display is channeled by the pastoral leadership into more quiet reflection. Here worship turns from noisy, heart-rending lamentation into calm reflection, rest upon the saving grace of God, the sheer joy and assurance of His lovingkindness. “Cease striving [be still] and know that I am God” (Isa. 46:10). The thought is that a holy day calls for sober as well as blessed contemplation: “The Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him” (Hab. 2:20). Ultimately focus on our sin and its symptoms should conclude with secure and calm repose on Christ.

d. A *holy focus* of the soul, v. 12.

“[Then did they] celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.” Here was a great kosher spread, a multitude of buffets that would cause a stranger to ask, “What means this great feasting?” In today’s world of thousands of church pot-lucks, the meaning would be social pleasantries, carnal indulgence, competitive cooking, gossip, political and secular banter. But not so here, when true revival has erupted. Rather “understanding,” cf. v. 8, has come as a result of the “words” of the expository ministry. The good food pleasantly gives strength, but the employment of that strength is in fellowship in the truth. The conversation concerns the LORD God and His Word; the concern is about holy conformity to that Word. Now Nehemiah’s hopes have reached fulfillment: “The God of heaven will give us success” (2:20). It is not simply walls rebuilt, the hanging of gates, even the necessary conviction of sin, but the holy enjoyment of God Himself.

2. Generating remembrance, 8:13-18.

One area of imbalance that a Christian can easily entertain in Bible study is that of greater concentration on either historical narrative or doctrinal precept. We are space time individuals, and for that reason we need to study the life of Christ in the Gospels. But we must go beyond events and happenings, as marvelous as they may appear. We also need to understand the purpose and application of those events, as Paul’s Epistles teach. Thus I Corinthians 15:3 combines both history, “Christ died,” and doctrine or the purpose of history, “for our sins according to the Scriptures.”

So the revival at Jerusalem under Nehemiah and Ezra further illustrates the vital relationship between these two elements. The study of the Bible leads to a recollection of distinctive history, of which it is full, and that remembrance is designed to be productive of God ordained results. The Bible repeatedly exhorts the child of God “to remember,” especially at the level of sacred history, such as by means of the Passover in the Old Testament or the Lord’s Table in the New Testament, to the end that he might live a sanctified life. Here we see this process in operation. A godly heritage promotes spiritual health.

a. A heritage based upon God’s Word, vs. 13-14.

The great day of spiritual awakening in vs. 1-12 was not “a flash in the pan,” so to speak. The next day there is ongoing thirst for the Word of God, and significantly not only by the laity, but also “the priests and the Levites.” Even the pastors had degenerated in their ministry; now they also needed expository ministry from Ezra. In this country there are many pastors who have fallen from their former commitment to “preach the word; [to] be ready in season and out of season; [to] reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (II Tim. 4:2). Some pastors cook up sermons for several years, and then relax while repeating them in subsequent pastorates. Some pastors trust in verbosity and eloquence rather than serious, prayerful study. Rather, a faithful pastor ought always to be discovering new light, fresh insights as he mines the inexhaustible resources of the Word of God. And the eldership should encourage this attitude.

When the pastor is like a ferret in the Word, his flock become like minded. Thus Ezra was a great model and stimulus in this regard.

However, at this juncture, what is it that particularly grips this congregation as a whole? Apparently Ezra has been expounding on Leviticus 23:33-44 concerning the establishment of the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, through Moses. Most likely Ezra emphasized that, according to v. 41: “You shall thus celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations.” Hence, the Jews awaken to their present neglect of this feast and its intended benefits. They have not remembered the LORD’S past dealings with them as they should. Here the fruit of Ezra’s applicatory preaching is evident.

b. A heritage based upon God’s earlier dealings, vs. 15-17.

The Feast of Tabernacles or Booths recalled the dwelling of Israel in tents during their wandering in the wilderness following their redemption out of Egypt. For seven days the Hebrews would live in booths made of tree branches, “so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 23:43). In other words, the history of redemption was to be remembered; this feast, “was to place vividly before the eyes of future generations of Israel a memorial of the grace, care, and protection which God afforded to His people in the great and terrible wilderness (Deut. 8:15),”⁴ that is following national conversion.

Indeed all three of the great Jewish festivals were rooted in the recollection of redemption and its consequences. This was undoubtedly so concerning Passover (Ex. 12:24-27). Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, was to be celebrated seven weeks after Passover for the purpose that, “You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and you shall be careful to observe these statutes,” (Deut. 16:9-12). The Feast of Tabernacles was for the same purpose: (Lev. 23:43). The same thought is enjoined in Isaiah 51:1-2, that is recollection of our gospel roots. “Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father.” It is the cause of stability and rejoicing to recollect, as did Samuel: “Thus far the LORD has helped us” (I Sam. 7:12).

What then was the effect of this recovery in Jerusalem of means of grace, leading to the remembrance of the LORD’S keeping of His elect? There was appreciation of redemption such as had not been experienced since the days of Joshua. As a result, “there was great rejoicing,” v. 17. There is something spiritually invigorating in meditating upon past tense salvation. This is certainly the intent of repeated participation at the Lord’s Table. The Apostle Paul reflected on his conversion on several occasions. As John Newton has written:

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

⁴ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary On The Pentateuch*, II, p. 450.

c. A heritage maintained by God’s Word, v. 18.

Not surprisingly, like one good meal at a restaurant leading to repeat visits, so these children of God, having been well fed to date, are eager to banquet with the Lord’s people time and time again. Ezra had proved to be a good spiritual chef, not just according to presentation, but more importantly concerning nourishment for the soul. So: “He [Ezra] read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a [climactic] solemn assembly according to the ordinance.” With sadness they had to return to the demands of the regular working week. But what preparation they had received for mixing with the world. This is what local church fellowship should be like. We regularly visit this spiritual oasis, lose worldly barnacles, digest that which nourishes our parched and starved souls, that is by means of spiritual growth hormones (II Pet. 3:18), and as a result experience spiritual reinvigoration.

3. Generating confession of sin, 9:1-37.

It is soon after the Feast of Tabernacles when ministry of the Word and confession of sin has led to “great rejoicing,” 8:17. Yet we now find this same cycle reoccurring. Why is this so? Because a redeemed people are still confronted with sin. In the same way, a Christian, having been certainly and securely saved, is yet encouraged to confess sin, though with one vital distinction. Before conversion, the Christian was an enemy and alien of God; having been converted the Christian is now a child and friend of God. Before conversion I was a willing, *agreeable* slave to sin; following conversion I became a willing, *agreeable* slave to righteousness. However, my remaining problem has been the overtures of “the world, the flesh, and the devil” (I John 2:16), so that I cry out concerning the agony of this tension: “Wretched man that I am! Who shall set me free from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). Let us now look at this relentless problem as illustrated by Israel. We will review 9:1-37 in a summary manner.

a. The congregation reconvenes to make confession, vs. 1-5.

It has confessed, 8:9, it is about to confess, and it will yet confess again.

- (1) There is evident consecration, v. 1.
- (2) There is fellowship holiness, v. 2.
- (3) There is reverent focus on the Word of God, v. 3.
- (4) There is godly leadership, vs. 4-5a.
- (5) There is godly response and praise, v. 5b.

- b. The congregation is led in confession by Ezra, vs. 6-37.

Following the congregational reply at the end of v. 5, Ezra steps forward to lead the people of God in confession. Probably vs. 6-37 reflect the similar emphasis of Psalms 105-107.⁵

- (1) The priority of the character of the LORD God, v. 6.
 - (a) He is Jehovah, the God of Israel.
 - (b) He is the solitary, only true God.
 - (c) He is the creator God.
 - (d) He is the living God, the source of all life.
 - (e) He is alone worthy of submission.
- (2) Review, the founding of Israel through Abraham, vs. 7-8.
 - (a) His salvation was by electing grace through faith, v. 7.
 - (b) His salvation was by a righteous covenant, granting a land for his descendants, v. 8.
- (3) Review, the redemption of Israel through Moses, vs. 9-25.
 - (a) Saving grace, from Egypt to Mt. Sinai; water from a rock, bread from heaven, guidance to the Jordan, vs. 9-15,
 - (b) Sin in the face of grace; rebellion, idolatry, blasphemy, vs. 16-18.
 - (c) Sustaining grace; a pillar of cloud, a pillar of fire, continuing manna and water, possession of the land, victory over the Canaanites, great spoil, "hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves, fruit trees in abundance. So they ate, and were filled and grew fat, and reveled in Your great goodness," vs. 19-25.
- (4) Review, the establishment of Israel in the land, vs. 26-31.

Here is a description of a repetitive pattern in the history of Israel of sin, discipline, and grace. But the larger picture is that of God's covenant faithfulness, likened unto the father who patiently awaits his prodigal son.

 - (a) Sin followed by discipline (oppressors) and grace (deliverance from oppressors), vs. 26-27.

⁵ C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary On Ezra, Nehemiah, And Esther*, pp. 237-8.

- (b) Sin followed by discipline (abandonment to enemies) and grace (rescue with compassion), v. 28.
 - (c) Sin followed by patience, discipline (foreign captivity) and grace (the return of a remnant under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah), vs. 29-31.
- (5) The confession of Israel under discipline, vs. 32-37.

Here the children of God are heartbroken over their history of sinning. Hence, “Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You,” v. 32; “we have acted wickedly,” v. 33.

- (a) Before a God of “covenant loyalty and loving-kindness,” v. 32.
- (b) Before a God who is always just and faithful, v. 33.
- (c) Before God’s “law, commandments and admonitions,” His Word. The result is a people under discipline, slavery, subjection to pagan oppression, vs. 34-37, in spite of the present restoration of Jerusalem. Even for the child of God, sin has consequences. Ask Abraham concerning the birth of Ishmael; ask Moses concerning his exclusion from the land of promise, ask David concerning family strife, etc. But true confession results in reconciliation.

4. Generating covenant commitment, 9:38-10:39.

However true confession takes steps to avoid being misunderstood. Hence, again, “Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You,” v. 32. Or as David declared: “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done this evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge” (Ps. 51:4). True confession goes to great lengths to communicate sincerity, earnest intent, and this the people of God do here by means of a covenant 9:38; it concretely signifies an intent, “to walk in God’s law, . . . to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and statutes,” 10:29.

At Christian Fellowship Church, we also have a covenant that calls for concrete commitment on behalf of the members. Its very nature makes us sensitive to our sins, and at the same time it expresses our hearty commitment in the future.

Before the congregation I publicly confess my faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation and heartily endorse the doctrines set forth in the Articles of Faith of the Constitution of this church, and furthermore I do promise, in dependence upon the Grace of God which helpeth our infirmities, to attend as diligently as possible upon the public service of worship of God in this church, to sanctify the Lord’s Day, to be faithful in private devotion, and to strive in all things to honor my God and Savior by a walk and conversation in keeping with the Gospel of Christ. I do hereby pledge sincerely and unreservedly to devote myself to the Lord to be His forever. I will endeavor to support and sustain the honor of God in this church, in contributing to its support, according as the Lord hath given unto me, and to preserve the good name of this church by a consistent

walk as the Lord shall give me grace, so that no reproach shall be brought upon the name of our God and Savior Jesus Christ or His Holy Word.

- a. The covenant document, 9:38.

In this earthly life, the most important of agreements are carefully documented, witnessed, and signed. These include, marriage, a house purchase, a legal deposition, constitutions, international treaties. In the days of Abraham, a covenant or בְּרִית, berît was “cut” (Gen. 15:4-21), animals being cut in half, indicating a solemn agreement that must be kept on pain of being similarly “cut” in half! So here a covenant is “cut” and “sealed,” חָתַם, châtham (cf. Esther 8:8, 10), literally with “sealings” by the numerous following signatories.

- b. The covenant participants, 10:1-27.

The leaders take the initiative, starting with “Nehemiah the governor” and “Zechariah” his associate, v. 1, then Priests, vs. 2-8, Levites, vs. 9-13, and leaders/princes, vs. 14-27. These represent households, not just individuals. However, the point is that the whole of the people of God, of whatever calling, commit themselves to faithful “local [assembly] church” fellowship.

- c. The covenant obligations, 10:28-39.

Ultimately, a covenant document such as this is only as good as the heart intent, the affections of those who sign it. The terms of the contract are good in themselves, but what matters most is the dynamic, the willingness, that is so intent on the will of God that it pursues it whether in fact there is a written agreement or not. Nevertheless a contract has the benefits of being a concrete record that helps us in our carnal frailty. The Bible as a whole is a similar concrete record.

- (1) Holiness, vs. 28, 30.

There has already been an expressed consecration to the will and work of God, that commenced with Nehemiah (2:2-3, 19-20; 4:6; 5:6-7, 11-12; 8:1, 6). This has meant separation from “the peoples of the lands,” that is their “impurity” (Ezra 6:21), unto “the law of God,” particularly its requirements of purity; this is now confirmed, v. 28. Further, there is to be purity of family life, and in marriage relationships; a believer is to only marry a believer. Holiness was God’s fundamental intent (Lev. 11:44-45), and it remains so with the Christian (I Pet. 1:14-16).

So at Christian Fellowship Church we have covenanted: “I will endeavor to . . . preserve the good name of this church by a consistent walk as the Lord shall give me grace, so that no reproach shall be brought upon the name of our God and Savior Jesus Christ or His Holy Word.” That also is a commitment to holiness.

(2) Submission to the Word of God, v. 29.

Already there has been an awakened thirst for the expounded Word of God (8:1, 13). What they have learned now stimulates them to, “take on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law, which was given through Moses, God’s servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes.” This is a commitment to go beyond the mere enjoyment of exposition to personal fulfillment of the truth of God.

So at Christian Fellowship Church we have covenanted: “Before the congregation I publicly confess my faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation and heartily endorse the doctrines set forth in the Articles of Faith of the Constitution of this church. . . . [This involves] striv[ing] in all things to honor my God and Savior by a walk and conversation in keeping with the Gospel of Christ.”

(3) Lord’s Day consecration, v. 31.

Here the people of God desire to preserve the Sabbath, not for the purpose of physical rest, but rather soul rest in recollection of the truth that they were a redeemed people (Deut. 5:12-15). The Christian, although not under the strict demands of the Jewish Sabbath, is yet to have the same attitude, that is a spontaneous desire for regular weekly fellowship in the gospel of the grace of God (Heb. 10:25).

So at Christian Fellowship Church we have covenanted: “I do promise, in dependence upon the grace of God which helpeth our infirmities, to attend as diligently as possible upon the public service of worship of God in this church, to sanctify the Lord’s Day.”

(4) Material support, vs. 32-39.

Here was a willingness, “to contribute . . . for the service of the house of our God,” v. 32. This included timber, first fruits from the field, dough, grain, wine, oil, tithes, also “the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle,” v. 36. To sum up: “Thus we will not neglect [forsake] the house of our God,” v. 39. As Ezra had fed the people with the Word of God, so they responded with material support of that which was of spiritual blessing.

So at Christian Fellowship Church we have covenanted: “I will endeavor to support and sustain the honor of God in this church, in contributing to its support, according as the Lord hath given unto me.”

CHAPTER V

THE RENEWED GENERATION

Nehemiah 11:1-13:31

SPIRITUAL awakening is inevitably confronted with not only the reordering of personal lives, but also the continuance of awakened spiritual life that, of necessity, involves more mundane matters. Herein lies the true test of whether spiritual conversion is genuine or merely a brief flight of religious experience. The same principle applies to attending church on Sunday. Let us suppose that the whole day has been one of great spiritual renewal, of heightened fellowship with God and His people. The real test of this is the week that follows. It is not like Tina, in Australia, who boarded with us and attended a large Charismatic church. She smoked heavily, outside the house! One Sunday she came home in the evening ecstatic, enthralled, declaring she had been at last delivered from smoking. But the next day she was outside, smoking yet again. I spoke gently to her, while pointing out that yesterday's experience was not authentic deliverance. She responded, quite casually: "But I was delivered yesterday; today I have just backslidden!"

A. The reordering of the people, 11:1-12:26

In 7:4, at the completion of the walls, yet Nehemiah records that, "the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few and the houses were not built." Hence, following the revival of 8:1-10:39, involving repentance, rejoicing, remembrance, and recommitment, plans are made to repopulate "Jerusalem, the holy city."

1. The principle of repopulation established, 11:1-2.

Everything in the lives of this people of God revolved around their worship of that only true and living God. Concerning Jehovah, the God of Israel, nothing was secondary, whether with regard to food, housing location, marriage relationships, children, national affairs, or music. Everything was integral to the worship of Jehovah. At this juncture, of prime concern was "Jerusalem, the holy city," especially the fact that its restoration should include a full, worshipping, holy population. The plan is for a proportion of nine tenths of the people in Judah to populate the outlying regions, while Jerusalem should contain one tenth, v. 1. Hence, employing the casting of lots, the following lists indicate how an accounting of this rearrangement of the populace was made. It is worth remembering that at this period Ezra is credited with the revival of synagogues, if not their origin, for outlying areas so that the more rural population would receive instruction from the Word of God.

2. The inhabitants within Jerusalem, 11:3-19.

3. The inhabitants without Jerusalem, 11:20-36.

4. The priests and Levites within Jerusalem, 12:1-26.

B. The dedication of the wall, 12:27-47.

What stands out here is the emphasis on music in worship, namely, hymns, songs, cymbals, harps, lyres, trumpets, singers, choirs, vs. 27-29, 31, 35-36, 38, 40-42, 45-47, and it is to be noticed that this follows *after* revival, not before (cf. Ps. 137:1-4). Martin Luther wrote: “St. Augustine was troubled in conscience whenever he caught himself delighting in music, which he took to be sinful. He was a choice spirit, and were he living today would agree with us. . . Next after theology I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor.”¹

1. Singing with praise and thanksgiving, vs. 27-30.

There were consecrated singers, Levites in particular, who were not employed merely because of their musical talent; there was a holiness in their hymnody. It has been suggested that the singing would have included Psalm 122:1-9 (1-3, 6-7); 147:1-20 (1-2, 12-14). But the congregation as a whole was to be consecrated/purified, v. 30. In other words, in singing, “And can it be that I should gain, an interest in the Savior’s blood,” this was a heartfelt, not a mere formal Sunday expression. In singing, “My Jesus, I Love Thee, I know Thou art mine, to Thee all the pleasures of sin I resign,” this was a passionate confession, not a hymnic tradition, a repetitive expression of sentiment.

2. Singing with focus on God’s granted success, vs. 31-43.

The singers form into two choirs that mount the walls, each going in opposite directions until they meet half way around the city. The completed walls are tangible evidence of God’s outpoured blessing. Then the combined choirs, “took their stand in the house of God,” the temple precincts, v. 40, with the priests and leaders, at which “they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar,” v. 43. Doubtless they could have sung Psalm 100, the “Old Hundreth.” When God grants success, there is something to sing about.

3. Singing with focus on God’s ministers, vs. 44-47.

Contributions, tithes, offerings are received in support of the priests and Levites, “for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served,” v. 44. There was great appreciation for the pastoral leadership that Nehemiah had gathered together. Why? Because, “they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David and of his son Solomon,” v. 45. Here the people realized that they had returned to “the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints,” Jude 3.

In particular there was a return to music in the midst of God’s worshipping people that was distinctively “God-centered.” In days past during David’s reign, before the downgrade of Israel and Judah, and the resultant exile, there were “the singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God,” v. 46. There was not the influence of pagan lyrics or melodies, the music of Sanballat and Tobiah?; the appeal was not secular with a religious dress, but spiritual, not worldly, but the holy reign of God, not

¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, pp. 266-7.

of abstract generalities, but concerning the revealed truth of God. Now that revival has come, so there has also resulted a revival in the music; it focuses on God, His glorious person, His righteous and gracious dealings with His people. The people of God now sing as David has testified: “He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God” (Ps. 40:2-3). Here is a record of revival in the realm of music; we need such a revival now! Today, much of Christendom sings, not a “new song,” but the common music of the world. But only a new heart, with a deep well of living water, can sing a new song. We sing about what our soul contains.

C. The reordering of religious/social relationships, 13:1-31.

In a theocracy, as distinct from a democracy, there is a merging of the secular and the sacred, state and church, things civil and things religious. Such was the case with Judah, and Jerusalem in particular, during the governorship of Nehemiah, commencing 445 B.C. So the preceding musical celebration at the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem was but one form of response to the success that God had granted to Nehemiah and the people of God. However other changes became inevitable in manifest social life, and they cannot be distinguished from the religious roots of revival. True spiritual awakening will effect the lives of those who come under its influence; there will be social results when the drunkard, the blasphemer, the thief, the brutal assailant, the political huckster are converted, when the liar, the bimbo, the sexual pervert, the gossip, the hypocrite become Christians. So here, the Book of Nehemiah closes with the fruit of genuine awakening, some of it being quite earthy. It goes way beyond periodic hymn singing, and concerns, in the language of today: 1. Church purity of membership; 2. Church maintenance; 3. Church fellowship; and 4. Church relationships.

1. Concerning foreigners in the faith (church purity), vs. 1-9.

Revival means the inevitability of a derelict past that is superceded by a holy consecration of the present and future. This means that past practices are done away with, as with the iconoclastic controversy during the Reformation. There will be behavioral correction, the cleansing of past bad habits, a return to purity in church membership.

a. The instruction in holiness, vs. 1-3.

Again the people of God are constrained by the hearing of the Word of God. In particular they learn that fellowship ought to be only between those with “a faith of the same kind” (II Pet. 1:1; cf. Amos 3:3; II Cor. 6:14-15). When the people of God gather for fellowship, it is not to include a mixed multitude that incorporates liberals, moderates, vague sentimentalists, traditionalists, etc. This is not to deny the visits of unbelieving strangers (I Cor. 14:23); likewise the gates of Jerusalem were at times open; but residency for unbelievers and pagans was prohibited, v. 3.

b. The institution of holiness, vs. 4-9.

In particular, the enemy Tobiah was not allowed to have “a room . . . in the courts of the house of God,” v. 7. He had displaced “the faith of the fathers,” v.

9. Hence for Christians today, the church of Jesus Christ is to have purity of membership. Our new constitution is for the purpose of informing prospective members of the standards of fellowship.

2. Concerning tithing by the faithful (church maintenance), vs. 10-14.

Material maintenance of the pastorate had been neglected, the result being that the pastors had to revert to working in their fields leading to the neglect of the house of God, v. 10. Mind you, the pastors had also neglected to feed the sheep with the Word of God. So there was a cyclical problem. But now the preaching results in supportive produce.

a. The instruction in tithing, vs. 10-11.

Nehemiah reprimands the leaders of Jerusalem for their dereliction of duty, and presumably extracts from them a commitment to pay the Levites, their pastors, a reasonable living allowance. In turn, doubtless the Levites were reminded of their expository responsibilities, 8:7-8.

b. The institution of tithing, vs. 12-14.

In this theocratic, church/state economy, the tithe was more akin to an income tax. Nevertheless, the point remains applicable for the Christian church in that, “the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel” (I Cor. 9:14; I Tim. 5:17-18).

(1) The application of the offerings, vs. 12-13.

Hence a spiritual revival becomes not only a revival with material consequences, but also a revival in organization. Thus Nehemiah institutes a plan for gathering and distribution of produce, along with the employment of those “considered reliable,” v. 13.

(2) The supplication of Nehemiah, v. 14.

Then, as if revealing a “weariness in well doing” (Gal. 6:9; II Thess. 3:13), Nehemiah expresses a cry for grace and mercy in his own life, cf. 5:19. Understand that when he cries out, “Remember me . . . for my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services,” this is the plea of a child of God, not an unconverted sinner. Paul reveals a similar concern when in boasting of his exploits for the Lord, he adds: “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches (II Cor. 11:23-28).

3. Concerning the Sabbath for the faithful (church fellowship), vs. 15-22.

What was the purpose of the Sabbath? It was for the remembrance of redemption, on the seventh day, that was consecrated for this purpose (Deut. 5:12-15). So regular Church fellowship on the Lord’s Day, the day of resurrection, is for the remembrance of and instruction in the overall truth of the Gospel. When church attendance declines,

there is a reduction of interest in the riches of the gospel. When a church is spiritually revived, there is a resurgence of interest in the gospel and its ramifications; attendance does not have to be artfully stimulated.

- a. The instruction in Sabbath keeping, vs. 15-18.

The children of God have retained, like their former captors, an obsession with secular gain and thus allowed the world, “men of Tyre,” to invade their holy calling, vs. 15-16. But Nehemiah warns from history of the consequences of such spiritual disloyalty, vs. 17-18. Surely this includes admonition from Scripture.

- b. The institution of Sabbath keeping, vs. 19-22.

So trade is restricted and the world is prohibited from entering Jerusalem on the Sabbath; the gates are shut for all of the Lord’s Day. To this the world responds with deviousness, parking just outside the walls, as if to tempt the children of God to pursue illicit trading, v. 20. Yes, the world will attempt to dissuade you from attending spiritually nourishing fellowship. Yes, the church will be tempted to embrace marketing in its courts. As Pastor Nehemiah dealt with this problem, so must we, yet not with lordly legal force, but by “proving to be examples to the flock” (I Pet. 5:3).

4. Concerning marriages of the faithful (church relationships), vs. 23-31.

In missionary evangelistic ministry, often there are knotty problems to sort out, such as when polygamists are converted. What is to be done with an excess of wives? Here there has been widespread marriage between believers and unbelievers, Jews and pagans. This presents a festering situation that proved to be damaging to the faith of Solomon.

- a. The imposition of marital purity, vs. 23-29.

Nehemiah’s opposition to this spiritual infidelity becomes surprisingly abusive, physical, and authoritarian, v. 25. An oath is extracted: “You shall not give your daughters to their [pagan] sons, nor take their [pagan] daughters for your sons or for yourselves, v. 25. Further corruption in the priesthood is rooted out; a grandson of the high priest has married a daughter of Sanballat; this was spiritual treason so that the unrepentant priest is driven from the temple precincts, v. 28. So Nehemiah invokes the judgment of God upon such unfaithfulness, v. 29.

- b. The summation of national purity, vs. 30-31.

Here is the cry of a faithful senior pastor which reflects a selfless priority, that is concern for faithful junior pastors and their flock first, and then himself.

- (1) Nehemiah is concerned about a holy ministry that does not justify spiritual mediocrity, and lamely confess, “I am not perfect, just forgiven,” v. 30a. Further he is concerned that they perform “appointed duties,” which, as we know, centers on the ministry of the Word of God, v. 30b. Nevertheless he is also concerned for the material support of pastors, v. 31a.

- (2) Nehemiah is concerned about his own soul, his own relationship to God; hence his concluding cry: “Remember me, O my God, for good,” cf. vs. 14, 22. This was Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28). This was a successful pastor, yet surely this was due to the fact that he was unwaveringly dependant upon prayer, 1:4-11; 2:4; 4:4-5, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5-37; 13:14, 29, 31.