

The

Book

of

Nehemiah

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Introduction

The story of the remnant of God's people who were delivered from the captivity in Babylon, and brought back to God's city in God's land is one of deep interest. The faith and zeal of this remnant, their failures and revivals, the work they accomplished, the opposition they encountered, and the difficulties they overcame, make their story rich with instruction for all God's people. Moreover, it has special instruction for the few who, in these last days, have been set free from the captivity of men's religious systems, wherein, alas, the vast majority of God's people are still held in bondage.

This story is unfolded to us in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. In the course of the story, the book of Nehemiah marks an important stage, for therein we have the last recorded revival that took place amongst the returned remnant. Throughout their history there had been several revivals, each having in view some special object, for with God there is no mere repetition.

The **first revival** was under the **leadership of Zerubbabel**, the governor, with whom was associated **Joshua the high priest**. In this revival the altar was set up and the foundations of the house were laid (**Ezra 3**).

The **second revival**, seventeen years later, took place under the ministry of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, resulting in the building of the house being resumed and completed (**Ezra 5**).

The **third revival**, some years later, under **Ezra the priest**, resulted in the revival of the law of God's house, or the insistence of holiness which becometh God's house for ever (**Ezra 7-10**).

The **fourth and last revival**, fourteen years later, under the leadership of **Nehemiah**, resulted in the building of the walls, the setting up of the gates, and the reassertion of the authority of the word of God.

Thus we see that this weak and feeble remnant, without any miraculous intervention of God on their behalf, was sustained in their position in God's land, and God's city, by these successive revivals in which God wrought in grace on their behalf. And yet in spite of every intervention of God, it is deeply solemn to note that their tendency was ever downwards to a lower spiritual level. The different revivals arrested the downward movement for a time, but

directly the energy that brought about the revival waned, the downgrade tendency reasserted itself.

Furthermore, it is instructive to note the different instruments, or vessels, that God in His wisdom uses to bring about these different revivals.

The first man God uses is **Zerubbabel** the grandson of Jehoiakin, king of Israel, a man of royal descent. Then, without setting aside Zerubbabel, God uses in the second revival **Haggai and Zechariah**, two prophets. Having delivered their message they retire into obscurity and the third revival is accomplished through the instrumentality of **Ezra the priest**. Finally the last revival is brought to pass under the leadership of **Nehemiah**, who was neither noble or prophet, or priest, but, as we may say, one of the common people pursuing his earthly calling as cupbearer to a king.

Thus we can trace the sovereign action of God choosing very different vessels to do very different work at different seasons; each vessel suited to the work, and the work suited to the time. On the part of these different men of God we see a spirituality that recognizes any special servant that God raises up, and hence a readiness to give place to others, and to retire into comparative obscurity, when their own special work has been accomplished.

It is hardly possible to read the history of this returned remnant and note their revivals, the instruments used, and the work they accomplished, without seeing a striking analogy to those who, in these last days, have been set free from the great Babylonish systems of Christendom in which the Church has been taken captive. Do we not again see in those set free the story of man's failure in responsibility, checked again and again by God's intervention in sovereignty? And have we not to own, with sorrow and shame that the tendency of this remnant (if we may so call them) has ever been downwards to a lower spiritual level?

Taking a general view of this particular movement of the Spirit of God in these last days, can we not see the revivals are analogous to those of the days of Ezra and Nehemiah? In the revival of the early part of last century, God used, as His instruments, men of great spiritual and intellectual endowments, men of great force of character, who, in any sphere of life, would have been leaders of men. Through these men the great truths concerning the Church were revived. Later there came to the front those who gave an immense impetus to the study of prophetic truth, and by their ministry the blessed hope of the coming Christ,

and all the glories connected therewith, were revived to the Church. Later still, there came to the front those whose ministry was of a more priestly character, bringing before the saints their heavenly calling with the privilege of access to God for His pleasure, and the consequent necessity for holy separation from the corruptions of Christendom.

In more recent times God has used servants who are not of outstanding eminence as rulers, or prophets, or priests, but who can perhaps be described, like Nehemiah, as of the common people, and, in most cases, pursuing some earthly calling while serving the Lord. Their special work, like Nehemiah's, is to build the walls, set up the gates, and assert the authority of God's word. In other words, to seek to maintain all the light and privileges that have been given to God's people through the leaders, prophets, and priests that have gone before.

As the story proceeds, the necessity for and the use of the walls and gates will become clear; and when seen it will be easy to grasp the symbolic meaning they have for us in our day. Here it is only necessary to point out that **the walls and gates** were erected in connection with the house of God — the walls to exclude evil and evil persons from the house; the gates to give free access to all the people of God who came in integrity to the house.

To-day the conflict amongst those who have been led outside the system of men is not so much as to the elucidation of the truth itself, but in regard to the walls and the gates by which the truth is maintained. If holy separation, of which the walls are the symbol, and the exercise of godly care in discipline and access to the privileges of God's house as set forth by the gates, are not maintained, the truth that has been recovered will soon be lost. And as in Nehemiah's day, so in our day, the attempt to build the walls and set up the gates entails conflict. As then, so now, it meets with strenuous opposition from within and from without. And as then, so now, every possible plea is urged against the maintenance of the walls and the gates. Latitudinarian flesh is ever ready to plead the demands of the service of the Lord, the liberty of the servant, the help of saints in the systems of men, the preaching of the gospel to the sinner — things so right in themselves — in opposition to the walls and the gates. And on the other hand let it be noted, that legal flesh is quite capable of misusing the walls and the gates for sectarian ends and party purposes.

The conflict with which we are faced today has been endured by other men in other days. And hence the story of their experiences, the opposition they had

to meet, the exercises they passed through, the circumstances of weakness in which they laboured and fought, the principles that guided them, their triumphs and their defeats become of the deepest interest to us, rich with instruction, warning and encouragement. And in reading their story, let us remember that "*Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through endurance and encouragement of the scriptures might have hope*" (**Rom. 15: 4**).

Furthermore as we approach the study of this portion of God's word, let us keep in mind that the autobiography of Nehemiah is a record of the last revival in connection with the remnant of God's people who returned from the captivity, taking place some **eighty years** after the first return; and that the special object of this last revival was to rebuild the walls, set up the gates, and assert the authority of the word of God.

THE GENERAL DIVISIONS OF THE BOOK ARE PLAIN.

1st. Nehemiah 1-3: The workman and his special work.

2nd. Nehemiah 4-7: The opposition to the work and the safeguards against the attacks of the enemy.

3rd. Nehemiah 8-11: The re-establishment of the authority of the word of God.

4th. Nehemiah 11-13: The administration of the city.

FIRST DIVISION - The Workman and his Work

Nehemiah 1: The preparation of the servant, or the secret exercises by which the servant is prepared for his work.

Nehemiah 2: The preparation of his way, or the circumstances by which the way is prepared for the execution of the work.

Nehemiah 3: The performance of the work, or the building of the walls and the setting up of the gates.

THE PREPARATION OF THE SERVANT - Nehemiah 1

In the opening chapter we have described to us the secret exercises by which God prepares the vessel for the special work in hand. Ezra, the instrument of a former revival, was not only a priest but a scribe - a student well versed in the Word of God. Nehemiah was rather a practical man of affairs, holding a responsible secular position as the cup-bearer to the king in the palace of Shushan. But the easy circumstances of the palace, the lucrative position that he held, and the favour in which he stood with the king, did not lessen his interest in the people of God and the city of Jerusalem.

He embraces the occasion of the arrival of one of his brethren, who, with certain others, had come from Jerusalem to enquire as to the condition of the escaped remnant and the city of Jerusalem.

He learns that, in spite of former revivals, the people are in great affliction and reproach, and as to Jerusalem the wall is in ruins and the gates burned with fire.

The people of God may indeed be in **affliction** because of persecution on account of their faithful testimony; and they may be in reproach for the name of God. Then, indeed, it is well with them, for the Lord can say, "*Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you and persecute you ... for My sake*" (**Matt. 5: 14**).

An Apostle can also write, "*If ye be reproached for the Name of Christ happy are ye*" (**1 Peter 4: 14**). But alas! they may be in affliction because of their low moral condition, and in reproach with the world through the inconsistency of their walk and ways. That such was the case in Nehemiah's day is witnessed by the fact that the wall of Jerusalem was "*broken down,*" and the gates thereof "*burned with fire.*" The desolations of Jerusalem were the result, and therefore the proof of the low condition of the people.

The wall symbolizes the maintenance of separation from evil; the gate stands for the exercise of godly care in reception and discipline. In any age looseness of association, and laxity of discipline, amongst the people of God, are sure indications of low moral condition.

There can be no spiritual prosperity among the people of God unless separation is maintained between themselves and the world, whether it be the world of a religious heathendom in Nehemiah's day, the world of corrupt

Judaism in the disciples' day, or the world of corrupt Christendom in our own day.

Such then was the unhappy condition of the returned remnant. They were in affliction and reproach. But the time had come when God was about to grant a revival, and the way God takes to accomplish this is noteworthy. God commences a great work through one man, and that man a broken-hearted man on *his* knees. For we read Nehemiah *"wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven"* (4).

His tears were the outward sign of a broken heart. His mourning witnessed how truly he entered into the affliction of God's people. His fasting proved that the iron had so entered into his soul that the comforts of life were forgotten and forgone. But all the exercises of this broken-hearted man found an outlet in prayer. He knew the power of that word long after spoken by James, *"Is any man afflicted let him pray."*

In this prayer Nehemiah vindicates God, confesses the sins of the nation, and intercedes for the people.

First, Nehemiah *vindicates* the character and ways of God. Jehovah is the *"God of heaven, the great and terrible God,"* and moreover, He is the faithful God who *"keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and observe His commandments"* (5).

Second, he confesses the sins of the children of Israel; and in so doing he identifies himself with them — *"We have sinned against Thee: both I and my father's house*

have sinned." Instead of loving Jehovah and keeping His commandments, he says, *"We have acted very perversely against Thee and have not kept the commandments nor the statutes nor the ordinances that Thou commandedst Thy servant Moses."* Hence they had forfeited all claim to the mercy of God on the ground of obedience (6, 7).

Third, having vindicated God, and confessed the people's sins, he now intercedes for the people, and with the boldness of faith he uses four different pleas in his intercession. **The first plea** is God's *faithfulness to His* own word. He has just owned that they have not kept the commandments given of God by Moses, but there was something else given of God by Moses. Besides the

precepts of the law there were the promises of the law, and Nehemiah asks God to remember this word of promise, given through Moses, in which God had said that if the people acted unfaithfully God would scatter them; but if they repented God would gather them, and bring them to the place that Jehovah had chosen to set His name. Then Nehemiah advances **a second plea**; the people for whom he pleads are God's servants and God's *people*. Moreover, **a third plea** is not only are they God's people, but they are God's people by God's work of **redemption**. **Finally** he closes his intercession by identifying with himself all those who fear God's name, and pleading the mercy of God (8-10).

Thus having vindicated God, and confessed the sin of the people he intercedes with God, pleading God's word, God's people, God's work of redemption, and God's mercy.

THE PREPARATION OF THE WAY - Nehemiah 2

In the first chapter we have seen the secret exercises by which the vessel is fitted for the special work in hand. Now we are to see the good hand of God in preparing the way before His servant.

Before receiving an answer to his prayer, Nehemiah has to wait for a period of four months. God's people must not only pray, but watch unto prayer. God hears and God answers, but it will be in God's own time and God's own way. And God's answers often come in a manner, and at a moment, little expected by ourselves.

Nehemiah was pursuing his everyday duties as cupbearer to the king when the opportunity is given to open his heart before his royal master. Seizing the occasion, he tells the king that the sadness of his face reflects the sorrow of his heart, for he says, "*The city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire.*" The king, apparently interested, at once replies, "For what dost thou make request?"

This brings to the front a fine feature in the character of Nehemiah — his habitual dependence upon God. After four months exercise before God, Nehemiah surely knew what he desired; nevertheless, before expressing his desire, he tells us that he "*prayed to God of heaven.*" Then it was that he replied to the king on earth, and asks to be sent to Jerusalem to build the walls. In reply the king grants his request, sets him a time, and gives him letters to the

governors and the keeper of the king's forest to help forward the work. At once Nehemiah recognizes that the ready compliance of the king was the result of the good hand of God. Before making his request Nehemiah had turned to God, and now that his request is granted he acknowledges the good hand of God. We may remember to turn to God in our difficulties and forget to acknowledge the goodness of God when they are met. It is well to enter a difficulty in a spirit of prayer, and to come out of it in a spirit of praise (1-8).

The details of Nehemiah's journey to Jerusalem follow. He is accompanied by captains of the king's army and horsemen. We are expressly told that the king sent the captains and the horsemen, not that Nehemiah had asked for them. Nehemiah was travelling as the king's cup-bearer, and probably the king was thinking more of his dignity than of Nehemiah's safety. Even so, God can use the dignity of a king and the requirements of royalty to provide for the welfare of His servants. That the circumstances demanded some such protection is manifest, for we are at once told of the enemies of God's people who are grieved exceedingly that a man had come to seek the welfare of God's people (9, 10).

It is noticeable that as dispensations wear to their close, there is less and less public intervention on part of God. Israel's six hundred thousand take their journey from Egypt to Canaan accompanied by the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night; and every stage of that wondrous journey is marked by miraculous interventions of God. It is far otherwise in the days of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. They, too, take their several wilderness journeys from the land of captivity to the land of Jehovah, but no visible and overshadowing cloud protects them by day, and no pillar of fire lights their way by night. They must be content to use the ordinary means of travel such as the time and country supply. Moreover, as the days advance, the outward circumstances grow weaker. **Zerubbabel** leads back a goodly company of **forty-two thousand**; with **Ezra** there are only **one thousand and eight hundred**, and now **Nehemiah** must be content to **travel alone**.

In his day if any escaped from captivity, it was as solitary individuals. Yet if there are no outward and direct interventions of God, if the circumstances are weak, it becomes a greater occasion for the exercise of faith. Hence we see faith becomes brighter as the day becomes darker.

Arrived at Jerusalem, Nehemiah tarries three days. He has a great and serious work before him, and he will take no precipitate action nor show undue haste.

He is about to bear testimony to the distress of God's people and the ruined condition of Jerusalem. He is about to arouse the people of God to action, and direct them in their work. But he must first witness for himself the desolations against which he is to bear witness, so that he may do so in the spirit of the Servant who at a later date could say, *"We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen."*

Thus it came to pass that Nehemiah arose by night and some few men with him, and without informing others of what God had put in his heart to do, he makes his way to the gate of the valley, and from different points he *"viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down,"* and the gates that were consumed with fire. He will acquaint himself with the extent of the ruin. He pursued this mid-night journey until there was no place to pass. Faced with such desolation the natural heart might well conclude the case to be hopeless, beyond the power of man to remedy. For man, as such, it was indeed hopeless; but God had put it into the heart of Nehemiah to undertake this work, and God can enable a man to carry out that which he puts into the heart to do. It was the assurance that God had given him this work to do that was the secret of Nehemiah's power. There was no need to consult with any man about a work that God had given him to do. Counsel from men could add nothing to God, but might well weaken and discourage Nehemiah. Men would probably have told him that it would be wiser to let the matter alone, he would only distress himself by looking at the ruin, and stir up trouble among the people of God, and opposition against them, by attempting to rebuild the walls. Thus it was that Nehemiah takes his night journey in secret, to acquaint himself with the desolations of Jerusalem, and neither the rulers, nor the people, knew whither he went or what he did (11-16).

Having made his inspection the time has come to speak before the elders. He bears witness to the distress of the people, and the desolations of Jerusalem with its walls waste and its gates burned, and he encourages them to arise and build the walls that reproach be removed from the people of God (17).

Moreover Nehemiah tells them the hand of God was good upon him. The hand of God in government had used Nebuchadnezzar to break down the walls and burn the gates, but the hand of God in goodness was upon Nehemiah to build the walls and set up the gates. Having heard of the hand of God the rulers say, *"Let us rise up and build."* *"So they strengthened their hands for this good work."* Nothing will so strengthen our hands for a good work as the recognition

of God's hand directing the work. God has put it into the heart of one man to do the work, and now God strengthens their hands to carry out the work (18).

But, alas, there are others who are ready to oppose the building of the walls, and such treat Nehemiah and his companions with scorn and contempt. The leader in this opposition is not a heathen but a Samaritan (**Neh. 4: 1, 2**), one whose religion was a corrupt mixture of idolatry and the worship of Jehovah. In the eyes of the world he would doubtless be viewed, according to his profession, as a true worshipper of Jehovah. Nehemiah, however, is not deceived, for he says, "*Ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial in Jerusalem*" (19).

As then, so now, the greatest opposition to the maintenance of separation between the world and the people of God comes from the professing Christian who is in alliance with enemies of God's people.

Nehemiah, however is not to be laughed out of carrying out God's work, nor deterred by the contempt of men. Nehemiah realizes that if the men of the world oppose, the God of heaven will prosper the work (20).

In our day also, may we not say, that in spite of the ruin and desolation among the people of God, and in spite of all opposition, those who seek to build the walls and set up the gates for the maintenance of the holiness of God's house, will have the God of heaven to prosper them?

THE PERFORMANCE OF THE WORK - Nehemiah 3

The servant has been prepared, his way made plain, and now we have the record of the work. This special work, as we have seen is to bring about a revival, in the midst of this returned remnant, by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and setting up the gates.

To rebuild the walls and set up the gates has its answer in our day in the maintenance of the holiness of God's house through separation from iniquity and vessels to dishonour, and the godly care which gives free access to the privileges of God's house to all the people of God who come with integrity. Such godly care may indeed, at times, involve disciplinary action of which the gate, in Old Testament days was often the symbol. The details recorded of the work in Nehemiah's day are rich with instruction for those who, in our day,

desire to answer to God's mind for His people as to separation from evil, and the maintenance of holiness.

First it is noticeable that, from the greatest to the least, all were united in this particular work. Priests, nobles, and common people, were of one mind to build the walls and set up the gates. Those engaged in the work may occupy very varied social positions; some are "**nobles**," and some common people. Their daily callings may be very different — some are **goldsmiths**, some **apothecaries**, and others **merchants** (8, 31, 32).

Their individual work in the service of the Lord may be different, for some are priests and some Levites. But whatever their social position, their secular calling, or their special service for the Lord, all were of one mind and one purpose in building the walls and setting up the gates, and by this unanimity, as one has said, "*they confessed their need of separation from the nations around and took measures to secure it.*"

And for those today, who have been delivered from the corrupt systems of men in order to maintain the truth of the house of God, it will bring about a revival of blessing if, as led by the Spirit of God, and in obedience to the word of God, they are united in seeking to maintain separation from the religious corruption of Christendom, and take measures to secure it by means of the walls and the gates.

This unity of mind and activity for such an end are sure marks of a work of the Spirit of God. And being such, the Lord shows His special approval by recording the names, and families, engaged in a work that so greatly concerns the honour of His name and the blessing of His people.

But while all engaged in this work have honourable mention, yet it is to be noticed that some are *distinguished* in the work above others. Of Baruch we read that he not only repaired the wall but he did so "*earnestly*" (20).

Then some are distinguished for the **quantity** of their work. Of "*Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah*" we read that they not only set up "**the valley gate**" but they also built "*a thousand cubits of the wall*" (13).

The Tekoites not only repaired a piece of wall, following Zadok's work, but later we are told that they repaired "*another piece*" (5, 27).

And of others we read that they "*repaired a second piece*" (**11, 19, 30, N. Tr**).

Moreover some are distinguished for the **quality** of their work, for God makes a difference between "quantity" and "quality."

The quantity of the work accomplished by Eliashib and his brethren exceeds that of the sons of Hassenaah, for whereas the priestly company built a gate and apparently a considerable portion of the wall, the sons of Hassenaah only set up a gate. Nevertheless the quality of the work of the sons of Hassenaah exceeds that of the high priest and his brethren, for they not only built the gate, but they laid the beams thereof, and secured it with locks and bars. Such details are not recorded of the high priest's gate.

Again others are distinguished for their **personal faithfulness** in the work. They built over against their own houses (**10, 23, 28, 29**). God thus marks out for special approval those who are careful to maintain separation within the sphere of their own responsibility.

Furthermore one family is distinguished by the mention of the daughters. Shallum, a ruler, repaired the wall "*he and his daughters*." This then was a work in which women could rightly engage, and receive honourable mention for so doing (**12**).

But if the Lord stamps with his approval the work of these different labourers, there are a few things of which the Lord disapproves, and they are recorded for our warning. Of the nobles of the Tekoites we read that they "*put not their necks to the work of their Lord*." The stubborn neck that will not bow, speaks of the pride that governs the heart. They shrink from a path that makes nothing of man and his self-importance. It is ever thus, those who stand well in the religious world, are not careful to maintain the walls of separation.

Then we are told with careful detail that others built in front of the house of Eliashib, one man building to the door of his house, and another man continuing the work from his door (**20, 21**). The high priest was indifferent to his own house and put no locks and bars to secure the gate that he erected. As far as he was concerned he left his house and his gate exposed to the enemy.

And for all these distinctions — these approvals and disapprovals — there are causes and reasons in the lives of the approved and disapproved, not apparent at the moment but to be disclosed in the days to come, either now or

hereafter. For whatever the goodness of God to the people, His government takes its sure and irrevocable course. There is ever a reason that lies behind men's actions, though cause and effect may be widely sundered.

There is a reason for the significant omission of the locks and bars from Eliashib's gate, and in the near future of the story it is disclosed for our profit. We shall learn that Eliashib the priest is allied with Tobiah the Ammonite and Sanballat the Horonite. His own house not being in order he cannot build the wall over against it. Moreover he had prepared a great chamber for Tobiah in the house of the Lord, little wonder then that he put no locks or bars on his gate, for it is obvious that if he provides a chamber within for the enemy without, he must also leave the way free for the enemy to have access to the chamber. Thus it comes to pass that Eliashib, the one who should have walked with God in peace and equity is a cause of stumbling and corruption (**Mal. 2:16**). He makes a profession of separation by building the gate and the wall, to keep in with a separate people, but he is careful to put no locks or bars on his gate, to keep in with the man of the corrupt and mixed religion of Samaria, and leave room for the access of such among the people of God.

Alas amongst those who have been set free from men's systems in these last days, there have not been wanting leaders, who have made a fair profession of maintaining the walls and gates, and yet because of their links with the religious world, have been compelled to leave their gate unsecured.

They may plead love and largeness of heart, and the desire to avoid sectarianism, but in result their course, if allowed to go on unchecked, leads to the further weakening of God's people by gradually linking them up with the religious corruptions of Christendom.

SECOND DIVISION - The Opposition to the Work

Nehemiah 4: The roaring lion; or the outward opposition of the enemy.

Nehemiah 5: The corruption of the flesh; or the work hindered by the low moral condition of the people.

Nehemiah 6: The wiles of Satan; or the work hindered by the corrupt practices of the enemy.

Nehemiah 7: The administration of the City; or the safeguards against the enemy.

THE ROARING LION - Nehemiah 4

Every revival amongst the returned remnant calls forth opposition in one form or another.

1. Zerubbabel sets up the altar and lays the foundation of the temple, and immediately the adversaries, under the leadership of Rehum, raise opposition (**Ezra 4**).
2. The second revival, under Haggai and Zechariah, is opposed by Tatnai and his companions (**Ezra 5: 3**).
3. The third revival under Ezra finds opposers in Jonathan and Jahaziah (**Ezra 10: 15. N. Tr.**).
4. Finally the last revival under Nehemiah is opposed by Sanballat, Tobiah, and others associated with them.

This opposition is presented in greater detail than the former ones and is full of instruction for those who, in these last days, are seeking to walk in separation from the corruptions of Christendom. As in the past, so to-day every attempt of God-fearing men to maintain separation from evil amongst the people of God stirs up every form of opposition. Satan knows full well that if he can break down separation between the people of God and the world, every *truth* will be weakened and the *deeper truths* of Christianity entirely lost. Whereas the

maintenance of the walls of separation coupled with a right spiritual condition, will mean the preservation of every truth recovered in past revivals.

Coming now to the consideration of the opposition to this last revival under Nehemiah, it will be found that it takes different forms, the first being open opposition in which the enemy is seen as the roaring lion (**1 Peter 5:8**). This form of opposition is mainly before us in **chapter 4**, together with the special difficulties that it creates.

It will be remembered that the arrival of Nehemiah in Jerusalem had *grieved* the enemy (**Neh. 2:10**). Then the decision to build the wall called forth their *scorn* (**Neh. 2:19**). Now that the good work is in hand it *stirs up their rage* and indignation (**Neh. 4:1**), leading to the adoption of violent measures, for they conspire "*to come and fight against Jerusalem.*"

At first, however, the opposers seek to cover their real feelings of rage by the affectation of contempt for a feeble people and their puny efforts, which, they say, a fox would bring to nothing. If this represented the true state of the case, it would have been needless to trouble themselves further. They could very well leave the matter to the fox to deal with.

Looking merely on the outward circumstances, the enemy with some show of truth, speak of this little remnant as "*feeble,*" and very well ask, "*Shall they be permitted to go on.*" (N. Tr.), to sacrifice, to "*finish,*" and "*revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish?*" But in such questions they left out God and His grace, and talked folly about a fox.

The course Nehemiah takes to meet this attack is simple and instructive. Faced by the rage of Sanballat, "*his brethren, and the army of Samaria*" he refuses to be drawn into any argument against them; he makes no appeal to them; he suggests no compromise with them; nor does he go forth to oppose them, but *he turns to God.*

The enemy left God out, Nehemiah brings God in. He owns that the people are despised and in "*reproach*" (**4**). When in Babylon he had owned the reproach of the people (**Neh. 1: 3**), but how different the circumstances: then they were in reproach because of the ruin of the wall, now they are in reproach because of the building of the wall. In the former case "*reproach*" was to their shame, now it is to their honour.

Moreover having owned the affliction of the people, Nehemiah proceeds to spread out before God the sin of their opposers, and asks that they may be given "*for a prey in the land of captivity.*" It is not ours, in this day of grace, to ask for judgment on those who oppose, and yet how constantly it is seen, in the government of God, that those who oppose the maintenance of the walls of separation *fall into hopeless captivity to the religious world.*

But while Nehemiah was fully aware of the opposition of the enemy and, in secret, meets it by the power of prayer, in public the work went on "*for the people had a mind (lit. "a heart") to work.*" It was not simply that Nehemiah and a few earnest leaders had a mind to work, but "*the people*" had a mind to work. Their heart was in the work of maintaining what was due to God by means of the walls and gates. This unity of mind, and energy of purpose, gave sure evidence of a work of the Spirit of God.

Nor is it otherwise to-day. As then, God may call attention to the need of separation from evil by one or two, but if there is a general movement amongst the people of God uniting them in one mind and effort to maintain separation from evil, it will surely evidence a work of the Spirit of God.

The united perseverance of the people of God arouses the united opposition of the enemy (7, 8). Hitherto the opposition had come from individuals but now, Arabians, Ammonites, and Ashdodites, unite with Sanballat and Tobiah "*to fight against Jerusalem.*"

People with very different interests and views can join hands in opposing a movement which is of God. And this united movement emboldens the opposition to violent measures. Commencing with sneers, developing into rage, it ends in violent methods. Again and again has this been verified in the history of God's people. Those who end in taking violent measures generally commence by speaking sneeringly of their brethren. Again as the spirit in which the people proceed with the work proves the movement to be of God, so the spirit of the opposition proves it to be a work of the enemy. For behind this joint attack there is "*wrath*" and "*conspiracy.*" "*The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*" (James 1: 20), and the Spirit of God will be no party to underhand human devices. Thus it is that the true character of the opposition can often be detected by its carnal methods.

The people of God have to remember that the weapons of their warfare are not carnal. This the remnant in Nehemiah's day realize, for they meet this

united attack of the enemy by uniting in prayer to God. "*We made our prayer unto our God*" (9).

They met the power of the enemy by the yet greater power of prayer. When men turned upon them in rage, they turned to God in prayer. But if they set their faces toward God they also "*set a watch against the enemy*." And this still has a voice for us, for has not the Lord said "*Watch and pray*" (**Matt. 26:41**)? So too the Apostle, in the exhortation of the Epistle, unites "*praying and watching*" (**Eph. 6:18**). Moreover the Apostle has linked "*perseverance*" with watching and prayer, and this too is set forth by this feeble remnant for if they set a watch they do so "*day and night*."

Thus by prayer, and watching thereunto with all perseverance, the enemy is held at bay in this first opposition, but, as a result of the attack, the people of God are harassed, and this in a threefold way.

First it is by corruption from within (10). Alas there are those who take a leading place among the people of God and yet would stop the building of the wall. Thus we read "*Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall.*" The after-history will bring to light that the nobles of Judah are in constant communication with the enemy. For the moment this evil association with the enemy is not divulged, and the reasons they advance for stopping the work have no connection with the enemy. The facts they bring forward may be true, but the conclusion based upon the facts is entirely false. There is no question as to the weakness of those who bear the burdens, and it is also plain that there is much rubbish, but to conclude therefore that it is impossible to build the walls is false.

Yet how often in our days have these facts been asserted to contend for a similar false conclusion. There are still those who say "*The people of God are so weak, the corruption of Christendom is so great, evil is so universal, that it is really impossible to maintain a strict separation according to the word of God. We must accept things as they are and do the best we can.*" Such is the voice of Judah in our day. And as in Nehemiah's day, those who use such language are too often found in close association with the opposers of the truth.

Second, the remnant is further harassed by the fear of sudden and unexpected onslaughts of the enemy (**verse 11**). The adversaries say "*They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them.*"

This is a deliberate effort to obtain a footing amongst the people of God in order *"to slay them and cause the work to cease."* Again there are not wanting to-day those who would creep in unawares to undermine the principle of separation that is sought to be maintained.

Thirdly there is the attempt to harass those engaged in the work by the constant repetition of disquieting rumours (12). There are those who dwell by the enemy, and seem very well acquainted with all his doings, and by the reports they bring from time to time tend to distract the builders. They are not enemies, but Jews who bring these reports. Possibly they have no intention of opposing, indeed they may think they are helping by giving timely warnings, nevertheless they are doing the enemies' work.

Here then we have a little remnant of God's people set upon keeping out evil, opposed by the open opposition of the enemy, and harassed by the corrupt arguments of men in league with the enemy, the apprehension of unexpected attacks, and the constant repetition of disquieting rumours.

The remainder of the chapter informs us how these different difficulties were met by Nehemiah. **First** he arms the people for the conflict and sets them in the exposed places (13). There were *"the lower places"* and *"the higher places"* in the walls which were peculiarly open to attack. The devil cares not how he gets a footing among the people of God, whether by 'low' walk or 'high' pretension. May we not say the wall was low in the Assembly at Corinth where the world was getting in through lasciviousness? At Colosse, where the Assembly was in danger of letting in religious flesh by lofty pretensions, may we not say there was danger *"in the higher places"*?

To meet either form or evil we need to put on the whole armour of God. But in Nehemiah's day the confidence of the people was not to be solely in their weapons of defence. The word was *"Remember the Lord which is great and terrible"* (14), and thus would they be delivered from all fear. So too in like spirit the Apostle precedes his exhortation as to the armour by saying *"My brethren be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might."*

Moreover in defending themselves they were fighting for their brethren and for those who would come after them (14). In all our conflicts against evil and for the maintenance of the truth, we do well to keep before us these three things.

1st. To remember the Lord — all that He is and all that is due to Him.

2nd. To remember our brethren — that in maintaining the truth, often in a local conflict, we are fighting for all our brethren.

3rd. we are helping to maintain the truth for those who may follow us — our sons and our daughters.

Thus it came to pass in the days of Nehemiah God brought to nought the counsel of opposers. Thus encouraged the work proceeded as we read, "*We returned all of us to the wall, every one to his work*" (15). Every one had his appointed work, some wrought in the actual work of building, some in conflict against the enemy; some "*builDED on the wall,*" some "*bare burdens,*" some "*loaded*" the burdens, and there was one who sounded the trumpet to warn of danger. Every one had his appointed work but all contributed to one end — to build the wall and set up the gates.

THE CORRUPTION OF THE FLESH - Nehemiah 5

This chapter forms an important parenthesis in the story of the building of the wall. In **Nehemiah 6** the work is continued and the wiles of the enemy frustrated.

In this chapter the story is broken off for a while to face another form of hindrance to the work — the low moral condition *of* the *people* themselves. Does not this important consideration warn us that it is possible for an individual, or a company of saints, to be zealously contending for separation from corrupt religious associations, and false doctrine, and yet at the same time to be very careless as to their own state.

Labour and conflict characterize **Nehemiah 4**, but in order to be a vessel fit for the Master's use, and to be able to resist the attacks of the foe, there must be the maintenance of righteousness. Thus it is in the **Second Epistle to Timothy**, while we are exhorted to "*depart from iniquity,*" and "*purge*" ourselves from vessels to dishonour, we are also immediately warned to "*Flee also youthful lusts,*" and "*follow righteousness.*"

Having escaped the corruptions of Christendom it is possible to fall into the corruptions of the flesh. Never are we in greater danger of acting in the flesh, than when we have acted in faithfulness to the Lord. As one has truly said, "*We*

may be beguiled into moral relaxation through satisfaction with our ecclesiastical separation." How reasonable then the exhortation to "*flee also youthful lusts,*" and "*follow righteousness*" coming immediately after the injunctions to depart from iniquity and separate from vessels to dishonour.

This is the deeply serious lesson of **Nehemiah 5**. The opening verses (1-5) expose the corruption of the flesh that existed amongst those who were building the wall. The rich Jews were taking advantage of the poverty and need of their poorer brethren to enrich themselves. The daily necessities of life, the adverse circumstances arising from a dearth, and the incidence of taxation instead of drawing out the sympathy of the richer Jews, became the occasion of ministering to the covetousness of the flesh.

It was no question of the ordinary business transactions of life; but the needs and trials of the poor, (arising from special circumstances, such as a dearth), were used for the aggrandizement of the rich.

The root of the trouble lay in the fact that they were viewing themselves as forming distinct classes of rich and poor, and forgetting that whether rich or poor they were "*brethren.*"

Nehemiah meets this evil by rebuking the nobles and bringing the matter before "*a great assembly.*" He shows that to act thus toward *their brethren* was inconsistent with the redemption from captivity in which they all shared. Towards God it showed a lack of holy fear, and in regard to the *heathen* it would bring them into reproach (6-9).

How definitely the rebukes of Nehemiah remind us that in all our conduct to one another, we should act as *brethren*, in the fear of God, so that in nothing we give occasion for the reproaches of the world. The rebukes of Nehemiah find their counterpart in the exhortation of Paul when he tells Titus that grace teaches us to "*live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world*" (**Titus 2:12**). Thus we should act with self-restraint and consideration for our brethren (for such is the literal meaning of the word "*soberly*"), righteously toward those without, and piously toward God.

Moreover the Apostle exhorts us to bear "*one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ*" (**Gal. 4:2**). The law of Christ is that we love one another, and this spirit of holy love is necessary, if we are to take up one another's burdens. Failing this, class is set against class.

Under the rebukes of Nehemiah, the nobles, rulers, and the priests, correct this evil, and all the congregation *"praised the Lord"* (9-13). Moreover Nehemiah not only rebuked and exhorted others, but in his mode of life he was also a pattern to them. He considered the people (14 and 18); he walked in the fear of God (15); and he showed hospitality to the heathen, to remove all occasion for reproach (17).

THE WILES OF THE DEVIL - Nehemiah 6

Nehemiah has faced, and triumphed over, the open opposition of the enemy: he has met too the corruptions of the flesh: now he is called upon to *"stand against the wiles of the devil."* Under the guise of friendly interest in Nehemiah and his work, the enemy will seek, by subtlety, to beguile him from the simplicity of faith in God, and so bring the work to nought by encompassing the fall of the leader in the work.

First, Nehemiah is called upon to face the *wile* of the *friendly* conference (2, 3). *"Come let us meet together,"* are the words of the enemy. And in reply the natural mind might suggest that, though actuated by very different motives, courtesy would at least demand that Nehemiah should accede to this request and hear what they have to say. There surely can be no harm in listening to their suggestions even if it be impossible to agree. However, no such arguments, if used, avail with Nehemiah. He realizes that Sanballat and Geshem are entirely opposed to the principles by which he is governed. In such circumstances a meeting would hardly help Sanballat, and would certainly end in *"mischief"* to Nehemiah. He escapes the snare by the realization of the greatness of the work that he is doing. Thus his answer is *"I am doing a great work so that I cannot come down."*

Having escaped this snare, Nehemiah is now called upon to meet the **second** wile of *importunity* (4). Not to be put off by Nehemiah's firm answer, the enemy repeats his request *"four times."* It was by this wile that Satan encompassed the fall of Samson in an earlier day. Delilah *"pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death."* Finally Samson falls before the importunity of his treacherous wife and *"told her all his heart."* In result he was robbed of his strength, the Lord departed from him, and he fell a prey to his enemies (**Judges 16: 15-21**).

The devil knows the weakness of human nature and under persistent pressure it will often betray the saint to give way from sheer weariness. Nehemiah

escapes this wile by simply repeating his former answer, as he says, "*I answered them after the same manner.*" He is occupied with a great work and he is not prepared to discuss it with those who are well known to be opposed to the work.

The **third** snare is *the wile* of the "*open letter*" (**6, 7**). It is couched in friendly terms and affects great concern for Nehemiah's reputation, which it is feared will suffer from certain derogatory reports concerning Nehemiah and his work. By being an "*open letter*" it is purposely designed to damage Nehemiah by spreading abroad evil reports.

If true, the charges would indeed be serious. For it is said that Nehemiah — the cupbearer and appointed governor of the king — is going to "*rebel.*" This is truly alarming for rebellion is an ugly word. Moreover a witness can be produced to support the charge for "*Gashmu saith it.*" Further it is said that Nehemiah's ultimate aim, in building the walls, is to exalt himself to the throne as king. And finally, report has it, that Nehemiah has appointed prophets to preach in Jerusalem, and thus endeavour to substantiate his claim to royalty by a professed word from God.

Nehemiah declines to be drawn into any argument with the tempter, or give any explanation of his work or motives. With great wisdom and restraint he simply denies the accusation, and exposes the origin of these evil reports. He sees, too, that the real aim of the "*open letter*" is to terrify the people by leading them to suppose they are linked up with one who is a rebel plotting against the king. Thus terrified their hands would be "*weakened from the work.*"

But, as ever with Nehemiah, God was his resource. The enemy attacked Nehemiah to weaken the hands of the people, Nehemiah turns to God to strengthen his hands that he might support the people (**8, 9**).

The wile of the open letter is followed by a **fourth** and more subtle snare. For now Nehemiah has to meet the *wile* of the false friend (**10-14**). Alas there were those within the city who professed great friendship for Nehemiah and yet were in the hire of the enemy without. Under the guise of friendship Shemaiah would associate with Nehemiah in order to betray him to his enemies. His words are "*Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple: and let us shut the door of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee.*"

Such language might lead the unsuspecting to conclude that Shemaiah was a real friend seeking to frustrate the enemy's evil designs and secure the safety of Nehemiah. But in the eyes of this God-fearing man the very methods suggested to secure his safety, arouse his suspicions. For it is suggested that Nehemiah — the leader in the work should flee from the work that God has put into his heart to do. Like David, in an earlier day, he could say, "*In the Lord I put my trust: now say ye to my soul, Flee as a bird to your mountain*" (Psa. 11:1). Moreover it is suggested that he should do what was unlawful (being neither a priest nor a Levite) in order to save his life. With the usual directness of this simple-hearted man, Nehemiah says, "*I will not go in.*"

Having withstood this snare, the whole evil of the wile stands revealed to Nehemiah. He detects that Shemaiah, though a prophet, was not sent from God, but was in the hire of the enemy, and therefore working for the enemy under the guise of friendship for Nehemiah. With Shemaiah also were associated "*the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets.*" To the profession of friendship they would add the weight of a professed prophetic utterance from God. What more terrible wile than for one who is in league with the enemy to approach a godly man, professing to be a warm friend with a message from God.

In the former wile the enemy falsely charges Nehemiah with using prophets for an evil purpose. In this wile the enemy does in fact use the prophets for his own evil ends. By means of gold he acquires an unholy influence over the very men, who by reason of their prophetic office should have been the first to help in the Lord's work by communicating the Lord's mind.

Having received the gold of those opposed to the work they cease to be the mouthpiece of the Lord, or a help to His people, and their efforts are all directed to *stopping* the work by ruining the character of the man who was *leading* in the work. This Nehemiah clearly perceives for he says of Shemaiah, "*Therefore was he hired that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me*" (13).

In the presence of this terrible wile, now fully exposed to Nehemiah, God is his unfailing resource (14). He makes no open attack upon the enemy, and apparently takes no active measures against his tools, but he spreads the matter before God, mentioning the names of the enemies without, and the woman within who is working behind the scenes. As one has said, "*There are many forms of evil which cannot be openly assailed without damage to*

ourselves and to others, and many evil workers in the church of God that must be left alone. To attack them would only serve the cause of the enemy; but our resource in such circumstances is to cry to God against them."

Such an appeal to God, is owned by God; for in spite of the wiles of the enemy, the work proceeds and the wall is finished. The fact that it was accomplished by a people so weak outwardly, in the presence of enemies so strong actually, becomes a witness even to the enemy "*that the work was wrought of our God*" (15, 16).

But there is **one more wile** that Nehemiah is called to meet, the *wile* of the good report (17-19). There were those amongst the remnant within, who were for ever sounding the praises of the enemy without.

They reported the "*good deeds*" of Tobiah before Nehemiah. Doubtless they would argue "Tobiah does not see eye to eye with us, as to the necessity of building the wall, but he is such a good man," and in proof "they reported his good deeds."

But while praising the enemy without to Nehemiah, they were equally ready to belittle Nehemiah before the enemy, for, says Nehemiah, "*They uttered my words to him.*" It would appear from these nobles of Judah, that Tobiah was marked by good works, while Nehemiah at best was only a man of "*words.*" However, the solemn fact was that those who were so forward to praise the enemy were in constant communication with the enemy, and sworn to him by reason of alliances with him. Thus, in different measures, it ever is, with those who, whilst professing to be at one with those who seek to build the wall, are, at the same time, loud in the praises of those who are opposed to the wall.

In all the conflicts of God's people, who, in these last days, have sought to maintain separation, have they not again and again been faced by these different wiles? Have we not known the wile of the **friendly** conference between those who hold opposing principles about which there can be no compromise: the wile of **importunity** which may lead the godly into a doubtful course for the sake of peace; the wile of the **open letter** — courteous in tone but malicious in motive; the wile of the **false friend** — who professes to give warnings from God though actually in the hire of those opposed to the truth; and finally the wile of the **good report** as to those without, from the lips of some within?

In all these wiles It is noticeable that the efforts of the enemy are in the main directed against individuals. In Nehemiah's day the enemy, wrongly or rightly, believed that if once the fall of Nehemiah could be encompassed it would be comparatively easy to overcome the mass of the people and stop the work. They might indeed be right in thinking that the mass are easily led into a wrong course, but they are entirely wrong inasmuch as they leave God out, and are ignorant of God's ways. They do not see that it is usually God's way to stem the tide of evil by one or two men, and that if they have done their work, or if they fail, or are overcome by the enemy, God can raise up others to carry on His work.

Nehemiah triumphed through knowing God and bringing God into all his difficulties. The enemy failed through ignorance of God, and leaving God out of all his calculations.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE CITY - Nehemiah 7

Having repaired the walls and set up the gates, Nehemiah proceeds with the administration of the city. Without walls and gates there would be no city to administer; and without administration walls and gates would be useless.

First then we have the appointment of the porters, the singers, and the Levites (**verse 1**). The porters had charge of the gates. Their responsibility was to admit only those who possessed the proper qualifications to enter the city, and approach the house and to refuse all others.

The singers gave the Lord His portion. It is only the redeemed that can sing the songs of Zion: hence the necessity for the porters to faithfully carry out their responsibilities, if the Lord is to have His portion. To let in those without divine qualifications is to admit those who cannot sing. Laxity on the part of the porters will mean loss to the singers. Worship is lost where the porters are lax. The loss of worship in any assembly of God's people to-day is generally associated with **lax reception**.

Lastly we have the Levites. If the singers maintain what is due to the Lord, the Levites care for the needs of the Lord's people. But the Levites must follow the singers. If the Lord does not receive His portion, the people will not receive theirs. The greater the delight in the Lord is the greater the interest in the people of the Lord.

As in the days of Nehemiah and the city, so in these days with the Assembly, those who undertake the work of porters, singers, or Levites, must be men who like Hananiah are marked by faithfulness and the fear of God (2). Neither social position, wealth nor the possession of gift would qualify for the care of the Assembly of God. Such work calls for moral qualifications.

There follows in one brief verse important instruction for those who have the charge of the city (3).

1st. The gates were not to be opened until the sun was hot. As long as there was any darkness the door was to be kept shut. And so in the Assembly of God; if any question is raised in reception, the door should be kept shut until all is made clear.

2nd. The porters were not to delegate their responsibilities or simply to give directions. They were to "stand by" while the doors were shut.

3rd. All the inhabitants were responsible to watch over against their own house; in order to secure the safety of the city. As one has truly said "*The whole city was necessarily what its several inhabitants made it.*" Nor is it otherwise in the Assemblies of God's people to-day.

A brief but suggestive note follows indicating the condition of the city. It was "*large and great, but the people were few therein.*"

It reminds us that however bright the zeal of the remnant and whatever measure of revival in moral condition had taken place, yet, in outward circumstances, they were marked by great weakness. God had opened a door of escape from captivity, but "*few*" had availed themselves of God's goodness — God's city is "*large and great,*" though the numbers of God's people that appreciate its greatness be few. And as it was in the day of Nehemiah so it is in our day.

The remainder of the chapter shows how Nehemiah connects the work he had accomplished with that of the remnant who first returned with Zerubbabel some eighty years before. How many that formed that remnant must have passed away in Nehemiah's day, but they are still held in honour, and their varied services recalled. The work they did in their day made it possible for the accomplishment of the work in Nehemiah's day.

THIRD DIVISION - The Authority of the Word

Nehemiah 8: The Word of God upheld before the people.

Nehemiah 9: The people humbled before God.

Nehemiah 10: The covenant to observe the Word.

The RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WORD OF GOD

Nehemiah 7: 73, last clause, and Nehemiah 8

The great subject around which all else centres, in the third division of the Book of Nehemiah, is the re-establishment of the authority of the word of God. It is thus significant that the last recorded revival amongst the people of God, in Old Testament days, is concerned with setting up the walls and gates, and the re-assertion of the authority of the Word of God. Further, it is clear that these two characteristics of this last revival are intimately connected and dependent one upon the other.

On the one hand, the building of the walls, the setting up of the gates, the appointment of porters, singers, and Levites, would all have been in vain unless carried out in accordance with the word of God.

On the other hand, having returned to God's ground for his people — the Land of Israel — having built the house, the walls and gates — this returned remnant find it possible, and comparatively easy, to obey the directions of the Word. In Babylon much of the Word would have become a dead letter, the very place making it impossible to carry out its injunctions except in a limited way. In the Land all becomes simple.

Has not this last revival of Old Testament days a voice for God's people in the closing days of Christendom? Does not the increasing evil of Christendom, the conflict for the truth, and the coming of the Lord call for a true separation on the part of the people of God? And will not those who truly separate from the evil find themselves, like the remnant in Nehemiah's day, in a position which makes it possible for them to obey the word. And thus the revival of Nehemiah's day may point to the way in which the Spirit of God is specially

working in these last days. The abounding evils demand separation, and separation makes possible obedience to the word of God.

These principles are illustrated for us in **chapter 8** of Nehemiah.

Thus having completed the building of the walls and the erection of the gates then *"the people gathered themselves together as one man"* with the desire to hear *"the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had commanded to Israel"* (**Verse 1**).

It is important to note that *"all the people"* (not simply those within the city) were concerned in this movement. The closing sentence of **Chapter 7** (which commences this fresh section of the Book) states that *"the children of Israel were in their cities."*

The story immediately continues in **chapter 8** by saying, *"and all the people gathered themselves together as one man."* This expression, "all the people" is repeated again and again (see vv. 3, 5, 6, 9: 11, 12, 13 and 17): This is important as interpretations have been forced upon the Book of Nehemiah which involve a distinction between those within the city and those without. This the picture will not, for one moment, allow. The people whether within the walls or without were "one" and gathered together *"as one man."* The walls were for the protection of the house, not the division of the people. They were not erected to create two parties among the people of God, and in the story did not do so.

The audience is composed of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding. And such was the earnestness of the people, that from morning until *midday* *"the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law"* (**2, 3**).

The Word of God was read distinctly and the sense was given, that the people might understand the reading. And God signified His approval of this return to His Word by recording the names of those specially concerned in this work, whether as associated with Ezra in turning to God in praise on the occasion of the opening of the book, or in actually reading and giving the sense of the Word (**4-8**).

In the remaining portion of the chapter we see the immediate effect of the authority of the word being established over the people. As ever it reaches the

conscience and stirs the heart. But conscience work comes first, "*All the people wept, when they heard the words of the law*" (9). As they listen to the word conscience tells them how far they have departed from its precepts. But if the Word exposes the failure of man, it also reveals the faithfulness of the Lord. So that if they rightly weep because of their own failure, they are also encouraged to rejoice in the Lord, for they are told, "*the joy of the Lord is your strength*" (10-12).

Thus encouraged the people render to the Lord His portion. However great their failure, however much they may have to confess and in due time humble themselves before the Lord, yet their failure must not be made an occasion for depriving the Lord of His portion. Yea, their unfaithfulness only magnifies the more the unchanging faithfulness of the Lord, calling forth His people's praise.

Thus it comes to pass the people keep the feast of tabernacles. This was the last feast of the year, completing the cycle of feasts, and setting forth in type the glorious end of all God's ways with His people by which He will bring them into millennial blessing in spite of their long history of failure. But not only do the people keep the feast; but they do so in accordance with the Word. It was no new thing to keep the feast — the people had done so in a former revival under Ezra (**Ezra 3**); but not since the days of Joshua had they kept it with booths "*according to the ordinance*" of the word (**18 N. Tr.**).

And in our day may we not say that though the Lord's supper has been kept all through the dark ages, yet not until a few had been delivered from the captivity of men's religious systems, could it be divested of all the idolatrous ceremonial, and superstitious accretions of men, and once again kept in holy simplicity in the presence of the Lord. It marks a tendency to return to system when the supper begins to be surrounded once more with mystery and ceremonial, or certain chosen persons administer it, in a certain determined order of procedure, even if unwritten.

And just as the Lord's supper takes us on to the coming of the Lord, and yet is a feast of remembrance, so the feast of tabernacles looks on to the day of coming glory, if kept in accordance with the word, and yet is a feast of remembrance recalling how the Lord had led the people through a wilderness journey during which they dwelt in booths.

Keeping the feast according to the word rendered the occasion a very bright testimony in a very dark day, and brings to light a principle of immense

encouragement, namely, the darker the day, and the weaker the circumstances, the *brighter* the testimony *rendered by those who obey* the word.

It was a dark day in Israel's history when Hezekiah kept his Passover. But to find a parallel to Hezekiah's revival we have to go back two hundred and fifty years to the days of Solomon (**2 Chron. 30:26**). It was a yet darker day when Josiah kept his passover, and yet so bright was his revival, that even the palmy days of Solomon afforded no such testimony, and we have to go back five hundred years to the days of Samuel the prophet to find a parallel (**2 Chron. 35:18**).

But in Nehemiah's day the dispensation was wearing to its end — the darkness was deepening, the circumstances weaker than ever before, and yet owing to the fact that this feeble remnant acted according to the word, the testimony rendered by them was so bright that nothing can be found with which to compare it, throughout the years of the captivity, the long history of the Kings or in the days of the Judges, and to find a parallel we are carried back a thousand years to the days of Joshua the son of Nun (**17**).

How deeply suggestive and rich with encouragement is this beautiful scene, for the people of God who find themselves in the last dark days of the Church's history on earth. If such will but walk in holy separation from evil, and in obedience to the Word of God, they will find, though the darkness deepens all around, and the weakness of circumstances increase, that the privileges they enjoy, and the little witness they render, will be brighter and purer than through all the long history of failure of the Church in responsibility. Such a witness will find no parallel save in the early days of the Church's history.

THE PEOPLE HUMBLER BEFORE GOD - Nehemiah 9

The return to the word of God, resulted first in the people rendering to the Lord His portion as set forth in the previous chapter. The second result is seen in this chapter in which the people take their true place before God owning their constant failure in the past and their weak condition in the present.

Having exalted the Lord in the feast of Tabernacles, the people realize the inconsistency of maintaining associations unsuited to the Lord. Hence the feast is immediately followed by "*separation*" and "*confession*." "*The seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers and stood and confessed their sins*" (**2**).

It is still incumbent upon all who name the Name of the Lord to depart from iniquity. But separation, if true, demands confession; for the fact that we have to separate at all, is the proof that we have been in wrong associations, and this wrong calls for confession. Then again confession without separation would be unreal, for how can we continue in the evil that we confess. Hence true separation and honest confession will ever be found together.

But whether the people are ascribing praise to God or humbling themselves because of their failure, all is the outcome of the word of God applied to the conscience, as we are told, *"They read in the book of the law of the Lord their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the Lord their God" (3).*

The remaining portion of the chapter presents the confession of the people. It is however prefaced by praise to the Lord. However much the people of God may fail, the Lord remains their unfailing resource. Hence the people did well to *"stand up and bless the Lord,"* who, however much we praise Him, will ever be *"above all blessing and praise" (4, 5).*

And as the remnant stand up to bless the Lord *"with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them,"* they are led of God to give utterance to a wonderful sevenfold ascription of praise, which brings God before the soul in the Majesty of His Being and the greatness of His ways. And that such a view of God in His glory and grace; is necessary for true confession is evident. For only as we have God before our souls can we truly estimate the gravity of our failure.

1st. God is owned as unchanging and eternal. *"Thou art the Same, thou alone Jehovah" (6, N. Tr.).* Amidst all changes in times, seasons, circumstances and men, we have in the Lord One who knows no change and will never pass away. As we read in another scripture, *"Thou remainest"* and *"Thou art the Same" (Heb. 1).*

2nd. God is owned as the Creator of all. *"The heaven of heavens and all their host, the earth too and all things that are therein, the seas and all that is therein, are the work of His hands."*

3rd. God is owned as the Sustainer of all. All creation is preserved by God and dependent upon God (6).

4th. God is owned as Sovereign. He chooses whom He will. He calls Abram out of Ur, and He changes his name (7).

5th. God is owned as the Giver of unconditional promises to those whom He has called according to His sovereign choice (8).

6th. God is owned as faithful to His word. He performs that which He has promised (8).

7th. God is owned in His ways of grace and power by which He delivered His people from Egypt, brought them through the wilderness and established them in the Land (9-15).

Having given God His place, the people review their path in the light of all that God is, and this leads to the confession of their utter failure. They find no good thing to say of themselves. They review their history in the wilderness (16-21); in the Land (22-27); and in captivity to their enemies (28-31). Their failure increased with the passing of time, expressing itself in different forms of evil. But one failure was common to every position — their constant disobedience to the Word of God. In the wilderness they hearkened not to Jehovah's commandments, and refused to obey (16). In the Land they were disobedient and cast Jehovah's law behind their backs (26). In bondage to their enemies they hearkened not unto Jehovah's commandments but sinned against His ordinances (29).

Nevertheless in spite of all the failure of the people they recognize that God did not "*utterly consume them, nor forsake them.*" And hence they rightly conclude that God is "*a gracious and merciful God*" (31).

Thus it is they appeal to the mercy of God. Linking up their present sorrowful condition with the past failure, they say, "*Let not all the trouble seem little before Thee*" (32).

But while appealing to the mercy of God they recognize the righteous government of God. "*Howbeit,*" they say, "*Thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for Thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly*" (33).

And all their wickedness they trace back to disobedience to the word. They had not kept the law (34): they had not served Jehovah, but followed their own wills in "*wicked works*" (35); and as a result they were in "*great distress*" (36, 37).

THE COVENANT - Nehemiah 9: 38, Nehemiah 10

The people have returned to the word of God. They have gone over their history before God, and discovered that the source of all their present distress lies in their failure to obey the word of God. Having clearly seen and owned their past failure, they seek to provide against its repetition. The means they adopt to accomplish this desirable end, is to enter into a sure covenant, written and sealed (**Neh. 9:38**). Nehemiah, twenty-two priests, seventeen Levites, and forty-four chiefs of the people, sign the covenant (**Neh. 10:1-27**). By this covenant they bind themselves by a curse and an oath (**28, 29**).

1st. As to their personal walk, that it should be in obedience to the law of God given by Moses (**29**).

2nd. As to the nations around, they would maintain a holy separation (**30**)

3rd. As to Jehovah, they would devotedly render to Him His due by the observance of the Sabbath, the holy days, and the law of the seventh year (**31**).

4th. As to the house of God, they charge themselves to maintain the service and not forsake the house (**32-39**).

All this is excellent in its time and season, and the covenant of this chapter is the outcome, and fitting conclusion, of the confession of the previous chapter. As another has said, "*Ceasing to do evil*" is to be followed by "*learning to do well*." It is very right, if we have been doing wrong, to begin with confession of the wrong, ere we set ourselves to do the right. But to do the right thing is a due attendant on the confession of the wrong thing. And all this moral comeliness we see here, as we pass from the ninth to the tenth chapter.

Referring to the terms of the covenant, it is significant to notice that while a very prominent place is given to the house of God, there is no mention of the city walls and gates. Why this omission, seeing that the special service of Nehemiah was concerned with the walls and gates? And why, we may ask, is so much made of the house of God? Is it not to insist on the great fact, as another has written, "that the great test of faithfulness was the upkeep of the house, the support of those who ministered it, and the necessary obedience to, and consistency with, the principles of divine order of which the house was ever the reminder and symbol. Yet there was no Presence in the house as there had been of old, and it was only of value in so far as its moral features were

maintained. The people within the city and the people without the city, — the whole people — through their signatories, signified their intention to conform to the will of God, and pledged their support to the house rather than to the wall. (To stiffen the wall without regard to the universality and purity of the house would only repeat the sad departure and obduracy of previous years). So families, cattle, fruits, harvests, vintage, were all to contribute from the country to the house, for a recognition of God, and for the support of the priests, Levites, singers and porters."

The realization by this returned remnant that all their prosperity and blessing depended upon the upkeep of the house is very happy, and points the way of spiritual prosperity and blessing for the people of God in our day (**Haggai 2:18, 19**). The method however, by which they sought to carry out their obligations, should act as a warning rather than an example to those who live in a day of grace. That the remnant of Nehemiah's day undertake the upkeep of the house by the way of Covenant is in keeping with the dispensation of the law in which they lived, and yet the history of their nation would warn us of the uselessness of man entering into a covenant with God. Did not Israel in their early days make a covenant with disastrous result? After three months of continual failure on their part, and unwearied grace on Jehovah's part, they entered into a covenant at Sinai, saying "*All that the Lord hath said we will do*" (**Ex. 24**).

Furthermore after the reign of the wicked Manasseh, there was a revival under Josiah and a return to the Word of God. Whereupon the King made a covenant before the Lord to walk after the Lord and to keep His commandments, "*And all the people stood to the covenant*" (**2 Kings 23:3**).

What was the result of these covenants? Israel having entered into a covenant to do all that the Lord had said they immediately set up an idol and apostatized from God. And of the covenant of Josiah's day, we are told by the prophet Jeremiah that the people turned to the Lord "*with falsehood.*"

With such sad examples before us we can see the futility of men's covenants and that though the people of God may return to the authority of God's word, and judge themselves by it, yet they will not in the future be able to walk according to the Word by any efforts of their own.

The people were perfectly sincere and intensely in earnest. But the fact that they had rebuilt the walls, set up the gates, and returned to the word of God, confessing their sins, apparently deceived them into thinking that in the future

they would do better than their fathers. Hence in apparent forgetfulness of their own weakness, and carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, they enter into a covenant for their future good behaviour.

Yet may we not say, when viewing the remnant in the light of the dispensation in which they lived, that they had ground for the course they took? Whether they did, or did not, make a covenant they were under obligation to obey the law. This obligation they accepted by way of a covenant. The light they had would hardly warrant them in taking any other course, even though the futility of covenants had been demonstrated in the history of the nation. For the Christian there can be no excuse. With the warning of Old Testament covenants, and the light of the truth which reveals the believer's place before God as "*not under the law, but under grace,*" how can we rightly revert to a covenant which binds by legal obligation? And yet in our own day, as throughout the Christian period, how often have the people of God bound themselves by covenants. At times sincere people, judging the prevailing low condition among the people of God, have strongly and rightly urged a return to the word of God. And the fact that a few have, in any measure, done so has, at times, deceived them into thinking that they were somewhat better than, or different from, those who have gone before them. The result being they have sought to provide for their future obedience to the word by means of that which, in principle, is a covenant written and sealed. Under the enthusiasm of a fresh movement, they seek to set forth clearly in writing the limits of their fellowship, the terms on which they propose to meet, the method of their reception and the character of their discipline. And this is sent forth subscribed by the names of their leaders. But what is this, in principle, but a covenant signed and sealed, betraying the legality of our hearts which love to have some written charter to fall back upon? The legal mind, however, while intensely sincere, is ever ignorant of its own weakness, and confident in its fancied strength. Herein lies the weakness of all such methods, they make too much of man, and dependence upon his definitions, interpretations and efforts. They make too little of the Lord and dependence upon His wisdom, His direction and His grace.

All who seek to act on the principle of the covenant written and sealed, will find that while it appears very easy, under the influence of a fresh movement, to carry out the agreed terms of fellowship, yet when the first fervour of the movement has passed away, the agreed terms are increasingly ignored, independency and self-will assert themselves, and disintegration sets in. That

such is the case only proves that it is impossible to hold the people of God together by any human formula, however sincerely, carefully and even scripturally devised.

It is not enough to get back to Scripture. We must also have the Lord Himself to guide, and the Holy Spirit to control.

FOURTH DIVISION - The Administration of the City

Nehemiah 11: The Distribution of the People.

Nehemiah 12: The Dedication of the Walls.

Nehemiah 13: The Discipline of the City.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE PEOPLE - Nehemiah 11

The subject of **Chapter 11** is the distribution of the people in the city and the province. As a result of this distribution Jerusalem is peopled by a certain number of the children of Judah (**4-6**), and of Benjamin (**7-9**); a considerable number of priests (**10-14**); some Levites (**15-18**); and the porters (**19**). Then in the province we find the residue of Israel, composed of priests, Levites and Nethinims (**20, 21**); the children of Judah (**25-30**); and Benjamin (**31-35**).

The distribution of the people throughout the Land is important when viewed in connection with the walls and the gates, which form the great subject of the Book of Nehemiah. For this distribution clearly shows that the walls were not erected to confine the people of God on the one hand, or to exclude them on the other. There were children of Judah and Benjamin, priests and Levites dwelling without the walls as well as within, and rightly so according to the ordering of God. We must remember that it was a nation that went into captivity, and not only the citizens of Jerusalem, and it was a remnant of this nation that returned.

To understand the necessity for the walls and gates we must bear in mind that, in the first instance, God delivered a remnant of His people from captivity and brought them back to the Land, under Zerubbabel, in order to build the house of the Lord (**Ezra 1:2, 3**). But the house being built, it became a necessity to build the walls and set up the gates *to maintain the sanctity of the house of the Lord*.

The walls and gates were not erected in order that a few within the walls might claim exclusive right to the house of the Lord, or to exclude those without the walls having access to the house. Had those within put forward any such claim it would not only have been the height of presumption, but would also have been the gravest possible abuse of the walls and gates. It would have been using the walls and gates for the exaltation of themselves, the exclusion of many of the Lord's people from their privileges, and the denial of the rights of the Lord.*

{*In the days of Ezekiel the inhabitants of Jerusalem actually claimed this ultra-exclusive position. They said to "all the house of Israel" "get you far from the Lord: unto us is this land given in possession" (**Ezek. 11: 14, 15**). Thus it was claimed that those alone within the city possessed the privileges of God's people.

The twofold way in which Jehovah rebukes their assumption — their exclusive and self-satisfied claim — is significant. First the immediate result of this exclusive claim on the part of Jerusalem was that "the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city" (**23**). They lost that which they exclusively claimed, for God will not connect His glory with the spiritual pride and assumption of men. Second, as to "all the house of Israel" — the excluded — the Lord says "Yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come" (**16**). This latter was but a provisional exercise of mercy and compassion (yet none the less real): for God's purpose is to have all His people "in the land of Israel" (**17**); separate from evil (**18**); united in heart (**19**); obedient to the word and in enjoyment of relationship with God (**20**). Ultimately as we know this purpose will be brought to pass.

So that neither could the inhabitants of Jerusalem lay exclusive claim to the privileges of the presence of the Lord (in fact the Presence departs from them), nor could the people of Jehovah be deprived of that Presence elsewhere when once that first glory had departed from Jerusalem.}

Let us then clearly recognize that the people were brought back to the Land to build the house and that the walls became necessary, when the house was built, in order to maintain its sanctity. Without the walls the house could not be maintained in the holiness that becometh God's house for ever. Without the house the walls would only have enclosed a select company seeking their own exaltation by the exclusion of others. Rightly used the walls maintain the holiness of God's house and thus secure the privileges of God's house for all the people of God. If abused they simply become the badge of a party, and the security of a sect.

Thus the right apprehension of this portion of the Book of Nehemiah is of the deepest importance to those, who, in our day, have been delivered from men's systems, in order to seek, once again, to maintain the principles of God's

house. Taking heed to the lessons of the story of this remnant, such would be saved from many pitfalls into which it is very easy to slip. We should indeed realize that without separation from evil it is impossible to maintain the holiness of God's house, but we should also realize the grave danger that exists of abusing the undoubted truth of separation in order to form a select company which excludes many of the people of God, denies the Lord His rights, and in the end loses the very truth of the house of God which a true separation from evil would maintain.

Such is the great lesson we can learn from the distribution of the people. The method of the distribution has also a voice for us, reminding us that if we seek to walk in the light of the house of God we must be prepared, like the remnant in Nehemiah's day, for circumstances of great weakness. The distribution by lot is a witness to this weakness. That such a method was necessary made manifest how small was the number that had returned to God's Land. Already we have learned that *"the city was large and great and the people were few therein"* (7:4). And yet, if their numbers were small their zeal for the house of God was great. Thus it came to pass, that those outside the city — *"the rest of the people"* — in their desire to support the house and the city, resort to casting lots, and in self-denial give up every tenth man to live within the walls; and further express their good will by blessing those *"that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem."*

How different will it be in the coming day of Jerusalem's glory. Then indeed the city will still be *"large and great,"* but no longer will the people be few. In that day the Land will be too narrow by reason of the inhabitants; and of the city, they will say, *"The place is too strait for me that I may dwell"* (Isa. 49:14-21). This indeed reminds us (to borrow the thought of another), that reformation, and restoration, and revivals, however bright and blessed, fall far short of the glory that is to come. There had been reformation in the days of the kings; there had been restoration in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, and these restored saints had enjoyed their revivals, but whether reformation, restoration or revival it was ever in circumstances of outward weakness. Nor is it otherwise to-day. Christendom has also had its reformation; we too have witnessed restoration and revival, but ever in circumstances of weakness, for however wide God's ground may be, it will ever be too narrow for religious flesh; and though the house of God embraces all His people it will ever be but a *"few"* who will be prepared to walk according to its principles and thus enjoy its privileges.

Well for us if we recognize and accept the circumstances of outward weakness, for then we shall not be diverted from the path of separation because those who take the path are few in number. We shall then walk in the light of the glory that is coming, knowing that if we maintain the truth, and walk in the light of the house of God we are maintaining that which will come into full display in the new heavens and the new earth. There indeed we shall find the tabernacle of God in the beauty of holiness, but the weakness will have passed for ever. The weakness will pass but the house will remain. Does it not encourage and hearten us to remember that what we maintain in weakness will be displayed in glory?

Furthermore may we not say that even the walls and the gates are not permanent? They will indeed be ever necessary while the house of God is in an evil world. But the house will remain when the walls are no longer needed.

It is true the heavenly city has its jasper walls and gates of pearl, for though the city presents the Church of God all glorious, yet it presents the Church in relation to a world in which evil will still exist, even if restrained. But in vision John carries us beyond the millennial day into that fair scene, where all former things are passed away, he sees descending the holy city new Jerusalem. But what he actually sees in the new earth is, not a city, but the dwelling place of God. "*Behold,*" said a great voice out of heaven, "*the tabernacle of God is with men.*" The tabernacle of God is there but the city walls and gates are for ever gone. No walls will be needed where there is no evil to exclude. There will be no more separation for there will be no more sea.

THE DEDICATION OF THE WALLS - Nehemiah 12

In the early part of this chapter (1-26) the Lord distinguishes by name those who were directly occupied in the service of the house of God. It was no small thing in God's sight, in a day of weakness, to maintain the service of the house, and, in the midst of the sorrows of His people, to lead the praise and thanksgiving to Himself. And God has marked His approval by recording the names of the chief priests, the Levites, those who led "*the thanksgiving,*" who kept "*the watches,*" and the porters who kept "*the ward at the storehouses of the gates*" (8, 9, 24, 25, N. Tr.).

All is now prepared for the dedication of the walls. The record of the completion of the wall is given in **Chapter 6**. But between the completion and the dedication of the wall there is the account of a series of incidents, which,

taken as a whole, present the dedication of *all* the *people*. The authority of the word is recovered; in the light of the word the people judge themselves, confessing their sins, and dedicate themselves by covenant to the service of God. Then a certain number devote themselves to the interests of the city and the service of the house.

This dedication of the people, as we may call it, makes way for the dedication of the walls. In view of this dedication the Levites are sought out and brought to Jerusalem; the singers gather themselves together; and the priests and the Levites purify themselves, the people, the gates and the walls (27-30).

Following upon this purification two companies are formed to make the circuit of the walls. These two choirs having gone in procession round the walls, meet in the house of God (40). There they sang aloud, and offered great sacrifices and rejoiced, for God had made them to rejoice with great joy. The women too and the children, who had been associated with the men in the confession of sin, are now associated with them in the songs of praise (41-43).

The dedication of the walls sets forth the appreciation of what God has wrought. The procession round the walls would give the people a comprehensive view of the extent of the city. According to the Psalmist they "*walk about Zion, and go round about her*"; they "*tell the towers thereof*"; they "*mark ... well the bulwarks*" and "*consider her palaces*." The result is, according to the same Psalm, they turn to the Lord in praise saying "*Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth is mount Zion, in the sides of the north, the city of the great King*." Then, as these two choirs meet in the house of God, they can surely take up the words of this Psalm, "*We have thought of thy loving-kindness, O God, in the midst of thy temple*" (Ps. 48).

Is it not manifest that the dedication of the walls — with the procession round the walls and the meeting of thanksgiving in the house of God — has its answer to-day in the appreciation of the preciousness of the Assembly in the sight of Christ when *viewed* in all its extent according to the counsels of *God*? And this appreciation of the Assembly according to the counsels of God calls forth praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. The true appreciation of the Assembly will never lead to the self-satisfaction or exaltation of the Assembly, but turns the Assembly to the One to whom the Assembly belongs, and for whose pleasure and glory the Assembly has been brought into being. If we appreciate the Assembly as viewed according to the counsels of God, it will lead us to say,

"Unto Him be glory in the Assembly by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen." (Eph. 3. 21).

Furthermore we learn from this fine scene in Nehemiah's day, that when the Lord gets His portion from His people, the servants of the Lord — those who devote themselves to the service of the Lord, will also get theirs. So we read, *"All Israel . . . gave the portions of the singers and the porters, every day his portion"* (44-47). If the servants of the Lord are neglected, it is a sure sign that the people of God have but a feeble apprehension of the Assembly and its preciousness to Christ. The more we value the Assembly as seen by Christ, the more we shall esteem it a privilege to fulfil our responsibilities and our privileges in ministering in temporal things to the servants of the Lord who minister to us in spiritual things.

Compared with the number of those who returned from the captivity only a few appeared to have taken part in the dedication of the walls. But those who compassed the walls would have for themselves an enlarged view of the city, and an increased joy in the Lord, and others, though taking no part in the dedication, would in a measure benefit, for we read, *"the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off"* (43). In our days there are those who accept in terms the truth of the Assembly and yet never seem to enter into the truth according to God. They have not walked about Zion, and gone round about her, and marked her bulwarks and considered her palaces. Hence they have known but little what it is to enter into the sanctuary of God and sing His praises. Nevertheless they will benefit by those who do. In the house of Bethany, in the days of our Lord, none had such appreciation of the Lord as Mary, who anointed the feet of the Lord, but others benefited by her act, for *"the house was filled with the odour of the ointment."*

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CITY - Nehemiah 13

In the closing chapter we learn that the practical holiness of the city can only be maintained by the exercise of a discipline that deals with the different corruptions as they arise. Nor is it otherwise to-day. Without the exercise of discipline according to the word of God, holiness cannot be maintained in the Assemblies of God's people when once evil has made itself manifest.

The **first difficulty** the remnant had to meet was the corrupting influence of *"the mixed multitude"* (1-3). They appear to represent those who in our day would like to stand well with the people of God in the path of separation, and

yet maintain their links with corrupt Christendom. In Nehemiah's day there were Israelites on the one hand and Ammonites and Moabites on the other; but there were also "*the mixed multitude*," a class who were neither definitely Israelites nor heathen, but sought to have links with both. The remnant realized from the word of God that not only the heathen were not to be admitted to the congregation of the Lord, but that they could not tolerate those who maintained links with the heathen — the mixed multitude.

The **second difficulty** was *the corruption of the house of God by a leader (4-9)*. Eliashib uses his position as priest to further the interest of his friend, and thus introduces among the people of God one who brings into the house of God that which is defiling. Nehemiah deals in a drastic way with this evil, wholly undeterred by the high position of the offender. Nothing can be more solemn than for a leader in the Assembly of God to set aside the principles of God's Assembly to further the interests of a personal friend, and at the same time count upon his position to silence all opposition. Evil of such a character calls indeed for drastic action without respect of persons.

The **third trial** is *neglect of the house of God (10-14)*. Those who devoted themselves to the service of the house of God were neglected, and hence they were compelled to return to secular work — they "*fled every one to his field*;" the result being the house of God was forsaken. This appears to have been the direct outcome of the corruption of Eliashib who had introduced, and made provision for, an enemy to the house of God, to the detriment of the true servants of God. Nehemiah is not content with casting out the offender and his defilements, but he re-instates the true servants and sees that provision is made for their need. We too must not be content with excluding those who are false, but must also see that provision is made to maintain the true servants. Moreover it is significant that Nehemiah does not say "*Why are the Levites neglected?*" as we might expect, but, "*Why is the house of God forsaken?*" He recognizes that the neglect of God's servants is an indication of that which is yet more serious — the neglect of God's house.

The **fourth difficulty** was *the desecration of the Sabbath (15-22)*. When the house is forsaken the Sabbath will be profaned. Instead of being set apart for Jehovah it was used to further the temporal interests of the people and turned into a common day. And in our day those who neglect God's Assembly will have but slight respect for the Lord's Day. If like Nehemiah we have the Assembly of

God at heart we shall see that we shut the gates against all that would divert us from the Lord's service on the Lord's Day (19).

The **fifth trial** was *unfaithfulness* to God (23-31). In this particular case it was manifested in the unholy alliances between the people of God and the surrounding nations. In this evil the family of the high priest take a leading part. Again Nehemiah drastically deals with the evil, and thus seeks to maintain the purity of God's people.

It is noticeable that these disciplinary measures deal not only with those within the city, but also with those without (15), and moreover apply to every class. The priests use their holy office to further the interest of the enemy of God (4). The rulers neglect the house of God (11). The nobles take the lead in profaning the Sabbath (17). And the people form unholy alliances (23). But the faithfulness of one man leads to these evils being dealt with in discipline without respect of persons, and thus the holiness of God's house is maintained.

In as much as the disciplinary measures relate to all that had returned to God's Land, and not simply to the dwellers in Jerusalem, it becomes clear they take for granted that the interest of every Israelite is identified with the prosperity of the house; and further that the dwellers in the province are as necessary for the upkeep of the house as those who dwelt within the city. The priests and Levites within the walls may be more directly concerned with the service of the house, but the story makes it abundantly clear that those within the walls were dependent upon those without for their daily food. The picture presents a people united in the upkeep of a house, which is surrounded by city walls to maintain its holy character.

It will also be noticed that in the main the evils dealt with are those which the people had, but a short while before, bound themselves, by a covenant with oath and curse, to avoid. How soon they have to prove their own weakness and in consequence the weakness of the law to either improve or restrain the flesh. For the moment these evils are dealt with through the faithfulness of one man. But with the passing of Nehemiah these evils will re-assert themselves until in the days of **Malachi** they characterize the mass, and the only hope left for the godly is the coming of the Lord. The remnant of Malachi's day feared the Lord and thought upon His Name, and so we may surely say they surrendered no principle of the house of God, but they made no covenant to maintain the integrity of the house. For them there was no call to make provision for their future good conduct, for they looked to the Son of righteousness to arise with

healing in His wings. All behind them was failure, all around them corruption, but all before them glory.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In closing this brief outline of the Book of Nehemiah a few additional remarks, as to its application to present day conditions, may not be out of place.

In regard to Israel it was God's purpose to have His house in the city of Jerusalem, in the midst of a people dwelling in His Land. Connected with this purpose are **THREE** important principles.

With the house there is the thought of God *dwelling*; with the city God *ruling*; and with the Nation and the Land; God *blessing*.

Where God dwells there God must rule; and when God rules, God blesses. It is thus God's purpose to dwell in the midst of a redeemed people, ruling over them for their blessing. This purpose will be realized in a day to come.

The Book of Nehemiah presents the story of a remnant of the nation acting in the light of God's original purpose for the whole nation, while waiting for the future fulfilment in the Millennial day.

To-day the "*material*" in Israel has its "*spiritual*" counterpart in the Assembly of God. We know that the Assembly of God is presented as **The House of God (1 Tim. 3:3)**; and as **The City of the Living God (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 21)**. Moreover believers are viewed as "**An Holy Nation (1 Peter 2:9)**".

So that again, we may say, it is God's thought to dwell in the midst of a redeemed people, ruling them for their blessing. God's purpose for the Assembly will be fully realized in the heavenly Jerusalem, as it will be for Israel in the earthly Jerusalem. With the truth before us we are able to realize how far Christendom has departed from God's purpose for His Assembly. Instead of God dwelling in the midst of a redeemed people, and ruling for their blessing we see a vast religious system in which every principle of God is set aside. It has its most pronounced expression in a great ecclesiastical organization (composed, for the most part of unregenerate professors of Christianity instead of the redeemed), which, in place of being the habitation of God, will shortly become "*the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird*" (**Rev. 18:2**). Moreover its rule, instead of being

a blessing to man, has corrupted the earth and persecuted the saints (**Rev. 16:18; Rev. 17:24; Rev. 19:2**).

Further we see that the vast majority of God's people have been taken captive in this great Babylonish system, though, by the grace of God, a few have been set free by having their eyes opened to see the truth of God's Assembly as the house of God. The latter have sought to walk in the truth of God's original thought for the Assembly while waiting for its full realization in glory.

Such, like the remnant in Nehemiah's day, find themselves in circumstances of great weakness, faced with opposition and difficulties, and beset with snares. In the face of all difficulties they seek to maintain the holiness of God's house, the rule of the city, and the blessing of God's people. However the maintenance of the principles of God's house would be their first charge; administration, or rule, would follow, and, if rightly used, would be directly under the influence of the house and in harmony with its character and order; therefore for the blessing of God's people.

It was thus In the Days of Ezra and Nehemiah. The revival of the house under Zerubbabel and others, and the restitution of its order through Ezra, was the first care of the remnant.

Later the house was encircled by the city walls, and administration, or rule established in relation to the house. From the first the house was always accessible to every Israelite from every part of the Land, always supposing title and moral suitability, and conformity to the ordinances of the house. There was no question of its being restricted to the few actually dwelling within the city walls. If such had been the case it would have been a grave misuse of the walls, and have falsified the true character of the house by limiting its privileges to a select and self-constituted company.

On the other hand to ignore administration, or rule, consistent with the order and sanctity of the house, would be equally serious, leading to every man doing what is right in his own eyes; the failure to maintain the holiness of God's house; and the loss of blessing to the people.

Thus we are warned that the holiness of God's house and the blessing of God's people can be equally lost either by ultra-exclusivism on the one hand or latitudinarianism on the other.

If we desire to know God's mind for the moment in which we live, we shall do well to go over these themes with God, remembering that, while *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,"* yet certain scriptures have a very definite message for a day of ruin. Of such scriptures none, perhaps, have a more important place than the Book of **Nehemiah** in the Old Testament and the **2nd Epistle to Timothy** in the New.

May God give us grace to diligently seek His mind, in His Word, and unreservedly submit to it. Thus only shall we be able to hold fast that which we have that no man take our crown.

