

Lesson 2 Nehemiah

Two groups from the captives in Persia had already returned to rebuild Jerusalem in partial fulfillment of God's promises to the Jewish nation. However, due to objection and false information from the neighbouring lands work on the project had stopped. Nehemiah was made aware of the plight of his people and the state of the city, by delegates from Jerusalem to Susa, the winter residence of Persian kings. Having heard of the terrible state of the city he turned to fasting and prayer and confession, in which he identified himself with his people.

Bad News

Nehemiah was cup-bearer to the king, one of the highest posts in the state, as in the case of Daniel. When we consider that the Jews were in captivity we are reminded that there is seldom an evil estate without one mitigating feature; seldom a cloudy day without an interval of blue sky; few lives without some sources of happiness. Obscurity, with all its dullness, has freedom from the glare and hatred of public life. Hard work knows, as luxury and indolence cannot, the enjoyment of rest. Evil tidings came to Nehemiah in his prosperity, and clouded his life (vers. 2, 3). Certain of his countrymen brought tidings from Jerusalem which were most distressing to him. The city of God was "in great affliction and reproach" (ver. 3); its "*wall was broken down;*" its "*gates were burned with fire*" (ver. 3).

There are people who would hardly allow their day's enjoyment to be disturbed no matter how bad the calamities. The quality our spirit is most clearly seen by the way in which we receive and deal with tidings of the welfare or misfortune of others. Nehemiah was a stout-hearted man who entirely forgot his own comfortable prosperity in the adversity of his race. To him the sufferings of his people were his own misfortunes. In this situation he "*sat down and wept, and mourned certain days*" (ver. 4); and (b) he fasted (ver. 4). These expressions of grief were to him natural and helpful. We may weep or we may abstain from food because appetite is killed by sorrow; but it is not natural, and therefore not right for us to have the tokens of grief which belong to other times or other peoples. But Nehemiah had also recourse to one universal source of comfort, he "prayed to the God of heaven" (ver. 4). He took his sorrow to the throne of grace, to the "God of all comfort;" he presented himself with aching heart to Him who alone can "bind up the broken heart." This refuge in time of trouble is neither for Jew, nor Gentile; it is human, universal, and unailing. In every clime and every age the stricken spirit can go to God, pour out its woe to heaven, and find calm and comfort in the sympathy of the one unchangeable Friend. "the psalmist declares, *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*" (Ps. 46:1). And Jesus Himself said, "*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*" (Matt. 11:28).

Nehemiah's Prayer 1; 5-11

Nehemiah reminds us that in the face of adversity, as in the moments of joy, we should rest in the calm assurance of our best friend, Jesus Christ. We have many recorded prayers in the sacred Scriptures that have various characteristics, and are the results of our individuality and varying circumstances. If there is one thing in which we should "be uniquely ourselves," it is our approach to Him who requires "truth in the inward parts." In the prayer of Nehemiah we find those characteristics which are able to address us to God, and which should mark our devotional life. In the prayer (ver. 6) Nehemiah speaks as one who feels that it is an infinite condescension

for the Majesty on high to "humble Himself to behold the things which are done upon the earth." In our "access with boldness" there is danger lest we run into irreverence. If we feel that our Maker is our friend, we must never forget that our friend is our Maker. Nehemiah shows this awareness, not only of praise and adoration, but of faithfulness to His promise. It is a fitting thing, well sanctioned in Scripture, fruitful of humility and sacred joy, to ascribe in prayer "*the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty*" to our God (1 Chron. 29:11; Rev. 4:11).

Like Daniel, he includes himself in the prayer of confession for the sins of the people. Our consciousness should impress on us the magnitude of our own guilt, and should lead us to confess both our transgressions (*we have dealt corruptly*) and our shortcomings (*we have not kept*). Our confession of sin should be simple and natural, not conventional or ostentatious. Beside the acknowledgment of our own personal faultiness, our sympathy with our fellows will lead us to confess our sins as members of a community. Then Nehemiah pleads with God in respect of His ancient promises, and he reverently affirms that these people for whom he is making intercession are included in those promises. We cannot do better than plead (a) God's word of promise, and (b) His past deliverances (ver. 10): David when captured by the Philistines said to the Lord, "*Thou hast delivered my soul from death: wilt thou not deliver my feet from falling?*" (Ps. 56:13). Nehemiah's earnestness is seen in the way he urges his petition: "*O Lord, I beseech thee,*" Earnestness is not content with one clear utterance, but is careful to return and repeat, it does not spare words; it pleads and pleads again. Finally, Nehemiah's prayer has a definiteness about it, he knows what he wants to happen. He prays not only for God's merciful regard to be given to his people, but he asks especially that the mind of the king, Artaxerxes, may be favourably disposed towards himself. We should consider what we urgently require when we draw nigh to God in prayer, and ask him for those special and definite favours which are most calculated to meet the need of our circumstances and life. Only, as here, we must be unselfish and high-minded in the desires we cherish

Nehemiah Speaks Out 1:11 n 2:1-8

Nehemiah did not disguise or restrain his sorrow; it was evident in his appearance. This would be a forceful appeal to the king, (ver. 6). His lament was the "one touch of nature that makes the whole world brothers, to allude to "the city of his fathers' sepulchres lying waste" (ver. 3) would strike a chord in any human heart and it did within the king. In his request. Nehemiah was mentally prepared for utterance; he had even calculated the necessary time (ver. 6), and the materials, he required for the work (vers. 7, 8). We must not expect to succeed in any delicate enterprise unless we enter upon it with calculation and care. The king was concerned for his servant and asked "*Why is thy countenance sad?*" Our sorrows may be concealed, but are never hidden from God, and He says ask and it shall be given. The face reflects the emotions of the soul; and it revealed the sorrow of Nehemiah. A sad countenance should awaken tender inquiry, wise consideration, and willing aid. Let us be ever mindful of the needs and the sorrows of others as Christ did while He was here on earth. Sorrow often has great opportunities opened up to it and therefore should not be neglected. The question having been asked, right away Nehemiah's sorrow opened up the king's resources to him. Through Nehemiah's prayer Heaven opened the heart of the heathen king in sympathy and his hand in help. The pain of the world is made to achieve high moral ends; a wise providence employs it in the building of broken walls.

Our sorrows often make heaven rich to us, it finds in prayer the guidance and culture it needs to use aright its opportunities so that (1) Memory is aided; (2) difficulty is anticipated; (3) preparation is accomplished (ver. 7); (4) and agencies are perfected (ver. 8). Opportunity must not be made by hasty, presumptuous attempts to command events, but by watching Providence. Like Nehemiah we must pray and wait for in God's own time it shall come to pass. The sorrow of Nehemiah was allied to the welfare of his people, and it led to the rebuilding of the broken wall of Jerusalem. Our trials are often the means of promoting the welfare of others. Christ's sufferings are allied to our best delights, and to our noblest achievements. It is indeed true that others build because we have suffered. There are things to be done for God which may be wrought by sheer and simple earnestness; but there are times when, if we cannot furnish it ourselves, we must give place to the man who can bring to the task refinement, delicacy, and tact. We must give way to the Nehemiahs in our Church or society; they will succeed admirably where we should fail ingloriously.

Nehemiah Sent 2:9, 10

Having been given permission to go and rebuild the city, Nehemiah, attended by a Persian escort, came safely to Jerusalem. The king had dealt liberally with him; he provided him with a military guard to protect him from the dangers of the road, and with letters of instruction to use at his journey's end (ver. 9). But the prophet soon found, as we have all found or will find soon enough, that the work we attempt for God can only be accomplished by triumphing over difficulties. The path of holy service lies over many a scorching plain, up many a steep mountain, along many a "slippery place." Nehemiah's great obstacle was to be found in the virulent enmity of Sanballat and Tobiah. When these men heard of his arrival, "it grieved them exceedingly that "there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel" (ver. 10).

From this statement concerning these men it seems almost incredible that they should have been "grieved exceedingly" because a man had come to seek the welfare of their neighbours. But we are soon reminded that in every land and through every age men have been jealous of their rivals' prosperity. These men concluded that the elevation of Jerusalem virtually meant the depression of Samaria; that, indirectly, Nehemiah had come to lower the dignity if not to lessen the prosperity of their state, and they counted him an enemy. Many wars were avowedly waged on some small pretext because one strong nation was jealous of the growing vigour of some neighbouring power. Not only nations, but families, societies, and sorry to say some Christian Churches have allowed themselves to fall into this situation. But we must come to see ourselves in the sight of God, and recognise that like Sanballat and Tobiah we are selfish, jealous and grieved at the prosperity of our neighbours, and allow the spirit of God to effect a change in us.

We must accept that our neighbours have as much right to make the most of their powers and opportunities as we have; the right to rise above us by lawful means as we have to remain above them. We, as well as they, have received our heritage from men and from God, and we have no moral right to limit their success, or to object to their power, or be offended at their superiority. We ought to understand that we are enriched by one another's prosperity, and as members of one body we should rejoice in one another's welfare irrespective of their particular persuasion or ethnic background. All truly religious work should be accomplished in the spirit of uncompromising faithfulness, and with complete independence of those who have no heart to "seek the welfare of the children of God." We should be Fearless of opposition, whether open or treacherous, wise and discretionary in the use of methods. The less confident must be helped by

those of stronger faith. The true leader must not wait for others, promptness is the soul of activity and the seal of success.

Nehemiah Prepares for His Task 2:11-20

Nehemiah came to Jerusalem under the protection of the king but still faced opposition from others around. It is not only, outside the church, that the Sanballats and Tobiahs are grieved and angry, but even within are found some who feel their own importance threatened, and allow jealousy, envy, and uncharitableness, culminating perhaps in open hostility, to prevail. The mission and work of Nehemiah should remind us of Christ's, who came "to seek the welfare" not only of the Jews, but also of the world. He came with the commission not of an earthly monarch, but of the Father in heaven. His personal qualifications were not simply those of an excellent and able man, but of perfect humanity united to perfect Deity. His compassion for men was that of incarnate love; His toils and sufferings, ending in a death of agony and shame, surpassing incalculably all that the best men have ever endured in serving their fellows. Yet men viewed him with hate and envy, and still turn away from Him; and His people render Him a love and co-operation far inferior to what Nehemiah received from his fellow Jews. Let us be careful to receive Him with a strong faith and submissive will for our own salvation; and then consecrate our all to His service, counting nothing too great to do for Him, no sacrifice too painful to make in promoting His designs for the present and eternal welfare of men. Nehemiah went out alone at nights to survey the buildings and to see what God would reveal to him.

The writer of Proverbs tells us that there is a time for everything under the sun. Due to the prevailing situation at the time Nehemiah thought it prudent to be silent about his whereabouts at nights. However there is also a time to speak and Nehemiah soon revealed his plans to others, that he might through their co-operation accomplish them. We may cherish the assurance of Divine aid and blessing in our endeavours when our endeavours are in accordance with the will of God and in line with His plans and purposes. When the course of action to what is put in our hearts are made known there can be mutual understanding and encouragement. *"And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work."* They moved because there was a need for united action, and they had a competent and resolute leader with full authority to accomplish the task being undertaken.

As Christians, we too have a leader, a Divine leader who is competent, resolute and all powerful who gives grace for every encounter. So let us "provoke" one another "to love and good works," and give ourselves to them with unanimous zeal, resolution, and confidence; thus "strengthening our hands for the good work." Like Nehemiah who remained confident when his opponents wished to deter him from the work he was undertaking, let us maintain our assurance that, "The God of heaven, He will prosper us." We have great need to be on our guard against the insidious influence of the worldly spirit, and the adoption of worldly means of doing what professes to be, but then ceases to be, Christ's work. We may not be justified in rejecting the material aid of worldly men when proffered without conditions (Nehemiah had accepted that of Artaxerxes), but we must never accept their counsels. The world is more dangerous within the Church than in open opposition. Faith in Divine aid will preserve from such a policy.