

Nehemiah and His Workers.

Nehemiah 8.

"Handfuls of Purpose" Part 3 (Miscellaneous, chapters 15 - 30).

Let fall for eager Gleaners.

Thirty Addresses on Various Scripture Truths and Incidents

by W. T. P. Wolston. M.D.

CHAPTER 19 — NEHEMIAH AND HIS WORKERS.

I desire for a few moments, beloved brethren, to direct your attention to Nehemiah 8, which shows us the result of being devoted. We find in this chapter the deepest blessing that could be imagined for any soul. Nothing in the history of God's ancient people presents a greater picture of the grace of God. The blessing of the faithful ones is seen to be higher even than in the palmy days of King Solomon. I speak of it that together we may encourage our hearts in the Lord, and that we may inquire what similarity there is between our circumstances and those of the remnant in Nehemiah's day. Those of whom this chapter speaks were a little company just emerged from captivity. They were setting themselves *to please the Lord*. Blessed object for any people, beloved!

Turn for a moment to 2 Chronicles 1: 1, and you will there find a point of great importance. It is said with regard to King Solomon that "*God was with him,*" and in Pentecostal days this fact was acknowledged with regard to the Church. God was known to be in the midst of His gathered ones. He showed also He was there in the judgment of evil which appeared amongst them. A holy fear controlled the hearts of men, and we read, "By the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; and of the rest durst no man join himself to them; but the people magnified them, and believers were the more added to the Lord" (Acts 5: 12). Also in verse 11 we read, "Great fear came upon all the Church, and upon as many as heard these things," so that in the world it was known God was with His saints, and amongst the saints themselves there was a wholesome fear of that which would not please the One whom they knew to be with them.

But things had changed since the days of King Solomon. All had turned aside, and the children of Israel had been carried into captivity. In their exile God spake to them by His servants, and in Nehemiah we read of a few who had answered to the prophet's call. We find in 2 Chronicles 36: 26 that Cyrus, King of Persia, took up the prophet Jeremiah's warning, and issued a proclamation to the captives in Babylon. These were his words. "Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged

me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? *The Lord his God be with him*, and let him go up." That which marked the King of Israel in the days of magnificence and power, we find promised to the one who set himself in the day of ruin, to please the Lord his God, and to obey His word. What wonderful encouragement! A company had gone up according to the decree of Cyrus, and in Nehemiah 1: 1 we find them at work in the land of Judea.

In Ezra we get the account of the building of the house. The setting up of the altar, and building of the house in the name of the Lord, may be regarded as a picture of that which God has done in these last days through a remnant of His people. The power of the name of Jesus has been asserted as God's gathering point for His saints. We are gathered by the Spirit of God, now in this world, to the divine centre — the *name of the Lord Jesus Christ*. The name of Jesus is to us what the altar and the temple were to the returned captives of Judah. Look at Nehemiah 1 and you will see amongst these people a picture of deep devotedness to God. The house was built, and the altar was there; but the condition of the remnant who sought to do the work of the Lord was far from what it should have been. This devoted servant of God saw this, and what did he do? He betook himself to prayer. "Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel *thy servants*, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee. . . . These are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power" (Ezra 1: 6-11).

It is blessed, beloved, when by the Spirit the question is raised in our hearts, "Is there amongst us that which suits the heart of God?" and more especially when the result of such heart-searching is to send us to our knees in self-abhorrence before God. The state of the remnant exercised the heart of Nehemiah, and prayer to God was the resource his soul prized. There is a personal character about all this, and individual teaching for each of us, beloved brethren. If the condition of the remnant in Israel was to be raised, the work of individual self-judgment was the means to that end, and if we, as a whole, are to be revived, we must begin at home. In such a way Nehemiah acted. "He sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven" (Neh. 1: 4). His sorrow was real and deep; his countenance was marked by the sorrow which burdened his spirit. The king remarked his looks; for Nehemiah was sad in the presence of the king, who said to him, "Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? This is nothing else but sorrow of heart." Then Nehemiah told the king the cause of his sadness. "The city of my fathers lieth waste," said he, "and the gates thereof are consumed with fire" (Neh. 2: 3). And the king encouraged him to make known his desires; but what does Nehemiah first do? Ah, this is beautiful! "So I prayed to the God of heaven." When there is real desire to do God's will, there will be much looking to God, to know what the desire of His heart for His servant is. Having prayed, Nehemiah makes his request to the king. He asked for twelve years' leave of absence, that he might do the work of God, and rebuild the waste places of Jerusalem. He prayed to God before he made his request, and the desire of his heart was granted. The king also gave him letters to the governor, and an escort for the way.

Thus prospered, Nehemiah came to Jerusalem; but, alas! he found no one interested in the work he sought to do, and, single-handed, what could he do? Well, by night he surveyed the city. Thus he made himself acquainted with the state of affairs, and then he tried to interest the

children of the captivity. "Come," said he to them, "let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach." Then he told them of the goodness of God, and the king's words to him and what effect had this upon them? They said: Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work" (Neh. 2: 18). Such was the effect of devotedness in one man. The influences of one such on those round about is unspeakable. The Lord stir up our hearts each one, that there may be this real devotedness working amongst us!

But no sooner is this real devotedness manifested than opposition shows itself. What would now answer to the devotedness which we see in Nehemiah? Souls being in the place the Holy Spirit would gather them to, and, when there, the heart answering to the claims of Him to whose name they are gathered. Beloved, if you give yourself to this, you may expect to be opposed. Satan ever sets himself against that which is really for God. Nehemiah and his brethren soon found this out. They were loaded with scorn by Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian. How would you have liked that? See how Nehemiah met his opposers! He said, "The God of heaven will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build the wall: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem" (Neh. 2: 20). Nehemiah knew who sent him to do the work, and he purposed to do it as God would have him. He took up very exclusive ground. What an example he is to us! I exhort you, and seek for myself to go in for this thorough carrying out of God's will. We are to seek to please Him, and He will prosper us.

The third chapter of this book is very interesting. It shows the record God keeps, how He marks our doings. Each company of workers is spoken of, and what each one did. Notice what is said of the Tekoites. They were so devoted that when they had finished their own work they directed their efforts elsewhere, and repaired "another piece" (Neh. 3: 27). But another thing is said of some amongst the Tekoites; for everything is marked by God — "Their nobles put not their necks to the work of the Lord" (Neh. 3: 5). I call this chapter a specimen page of the book of eternity. It shows what note God makes of the actions of His saints. It is the Old Testament parallel to what we get in Romans 16 of the New Testament. There again the deeds of saints are recorded, and divine comment made upon them. Phoebe is spoken of as a servant of the Church, and the succourer of many. Such was the letter of commendation the apostle could send with her when she went into a new gathering of saints. Alas! it is not often we can write such letters regarding each other. But some one asks, "Are not all the letters of commendation the same?" The apostle's were not all the same, if we may judge from Romans 16. He is careful to give each credit for the service which marked him; and in Nehemiah 3 the Spirit of God notices the particular work which each company, and even individuals, did in the service of the Lord in that day.

Just look at verse 10, where the work of an individual is recorded — "Next unto them repaired Jedaiah, the son of Harumaph, even *over against his house.*" This is very instructive. The Lord sees and knows what is needed to be done over against our own houses. He takes knowledge of the work of saints, even when engaged on what they deem very small service. Home labour is little seen by man, but God marks it well. It is most important service. You may not be able to pray in the assembly; it is not the place God has given to some to do so; but have you unconverted ones at home? Do you seek their souls for Christ? Do you seek so to live that

Christ is commended to them? This is service very pleasing to God, and in His book you will find it has its own record. "Jedaiah, worked over against his own house."

But some may not have houses of their own; they lodge in the house of another. Then the service of such an one we find mentioned in verse 30, "After him repaired Meshullam the son of Berechiah over against *his chamber*." He did his bit of work there, and it also is taken into account. The service of the sisters has its record here also, "Next unto him repaired Shallum, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, he and *his daughters*" (ver. 12). A lovely sight! There was a thoroughly united household — the daughters heart and soul with their father in the work of the Lord. But all did not work alike, and that also the Lord takes notice of in verse 20, "Baruch the son of Zabbai *earnestly* repaired the other piece." We may well labour earnestly, for who is the One we are called to serve? The Christ of God. And the building, of which we are the living stones, is the habitation of God through the Spirit. An earthly city was the object of desire with the remnant in Nehemiah's day, but how far surpassing is the one God has given to us — the Person of the Christ! We are living stones of the temple He builds.

What motives have we to be in earnest, beloved! Our calling is a heavenly one; but like the returned captives of whom we have read, we have come out of Babylon. We have made our exit out of that which will culminate in the spiritual Babylon of Revelation 18. They came from the literal city. We do not come out of the house of God; it would be a mistake to say that, for we are part of that house; but we are to separate ourselves from that which is not according to the Word of God — from the evil that has crept into the house of God. Our calling is to please God. Have we all set out with purpose of heart to do this? If we are faithful in this we may expect opposition; mockery and anger too may be hurled on us. This the remnant of Israel got.

"When Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. And he said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves?" (Neh. 4: 1, 2). But there was more than this. Tobiah the Ammonite heard what Sanballat said, and he also spoke contemptuously, "Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall" (ver. 3). Thus was the work of these true-hearted servants despised on all hands. Sanballat mocked them, and Tobiah looked upon their work as contemptible. And are there not Sanballats and Tobiahs now, who speak of the truth for which we contend in a similar way? Alas! there are amongst the children of God some who, from lack of knowledge of what the Lord, by His Spirit, is doing in these last days, oppose His truth most warmly, and have said of us, "Their work will all come to nothing." Now, let us learn from the captives of Israel how to meet such mockery and contempt. We read (Neh. 4: 4), they prayed, "Hear, O our God; for we are despised," etc. They told God they were despised, and they contented themselves to leave their defence in His hands. They believed He would care for His work and justify them.

Further, we read (Neh. 4: 6) the people "*had a mind to work*." Perhaps now and then we have a mind to work; but do we come together to pray about the work, as did Nehemiah and his people? Thus only can we be strengthened to go on to the praise of God. If there is not more expression of our dependence on God, the Lord will break us up, beloved. Prayer was always the resource of the captives in Nehemiah's day, and it should far more characterise us. As the enmity against these servants of Jehovah grew hotter, the more we read of their unwavering confidence in God — "Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and

night" (Neh. 4: 9). They prayed, they watched, and they worked with a mind. They were in downright earnest. Ah, my friends, would to God these traits were all more seen in us!

But it was not all bright; decay began to show itself amongst the workers. Read Nehemiah 4: 10, "And 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." Here is the beginning of *internal* weakness. Hitherto what hindered success came from without; but now faintheartedness appears in the workers; yet there was amongst them a devoted one, who was equal to the moment. Let us see how he acted: "Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall," said Nehemiah, "and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses" (Neh. 4: 13, 14). And what effect had these words of Nehemiah? "And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work." Blessed effect! Their hearts were turned to the Lord when they felt their feebleness; thus were they strengthened to go on. They counted on the great and terrible God, who brought the work and counsel of the sneering to nought, and the fainthearted burden-bearer was again set heartily to work.

But the workmen were watchmen as well as builders. Read verse 16: "From that time forth, the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons, . . . every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and *so builded*." The sword and the trowel are as needed in our day as in theirs. Then at verse 23 they seem to have reached the highest point of devotedness: "So neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing."

I pass over Nehemiah 5 with but little comment. There was internal trouble, and it came out. It is a poor thing when we fall out amongst ourselves. Satan is not careful what instrument he uses if only he can stop the work of God. His greatest victory is when discord is sown amongst the Lord's people. From verse 15 we learn what it was which ever kept the soul of Nehemiah right: "But so did not I, because of *the fear* of God." Thus was his heart in the presence of God.

In Nehemiah 6 we find the enemy making another and most determined effort. If he cannot succeed by attacking the captives from without, and if the internal trouble is settled, he will now try to get the remnant to be less exclusive. "Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief" (Neh. 6: 2). Here is the cry for union: "Why are you so exclusive? Cannot you join with us in the work of the Lord?" Now, beloved, Nehemiah teaches us, and Jeremiah also, how we are to meet all such advances. God in His grace has called us out from the evil that has come into His Church, and we must be careful not to lessen in the eyes of others, nor to lose the sense in our own souls, of the distance between the ground on which we are, and that out from which

we have come. Beloved saints of God are where we were, but true love will cause us to walk in the light we have received, that they also may learn and obey the truth in the love of it.

Listen to what Nehemiah said to the messengers of Sanballat and Geshem, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot comedown: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (Neh. 6: 3). This was a beautiful answer. So sure as we depart practically from the ground of thorough separation to which our Lord has called us, our strength will be seen to go. Any vacillation brings in weakness. In the world it is said, "Nothing succeeds like success." but, amongst saints, "Nothing succeeds like consistency." Nehemiah said, "Why should the work cease whilst I come down to you?" And Jeremiah said another very plain, and most helpful word, which it is well we should heed, each one of us: "If thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth; let them return unto thee, but return thou not unto them" (Jer. 15: 19). The separated one must say, "I am here for God, and I must abide with God." But if Nehemiah will not listen to this proposal, Satan will put forth one more effort. Tobiah, Sanballat, and others, sought to make Nehemiah afraid, but again he goes to prayer. In everything he turns to God, and at verse 15 we read: "So the wall was finished in fifty-two days. And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God."

Then Nehemiah 7: 2 shows that Banana and Hananiah were put in charge of Jerusalem, and a very beautiful thing is said of one of these men. Of Hananiah it is said, "He was a faithful man, and *feared* God above many." A lovely thing to be able to say of a brother in the Lord. May we merit such a comment! Let us seek so to live, that in truth this could be said of us.

In Nehemiah 8 two things come out — a deepening love for, and intelligence in, the Word of God. "The Levites caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." . . . And all the people wept when they heard the words of the law (Neh. 8: 7-9). Ah! the word had great power that day on the hearts and consciences of the people. And what followed this real heart-searching? Blessing, of course. "Nehemiah and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said, Mourn not, nor weep, neither be ye sorry; for *the joy of the Lord is your strength.*" And at verse 12 we read of great mirth, "because they had understood the words that were declared unto them." They wept, for they knew how weak they were; but joy filled their hearts because God was their strength. It is well to feel our weakness, and to acknowledge it; but what cause for joy when we learn the strength of the Lord is ours! The joy of the Lord must be that which sustains us. Then we have strength outside, and in spite, of all circumstances. Individually we ought to be so happy and so sure of our position that we have a portion to give to others. Streams of blessing should flow from us; we should be a refreshment to every one who crosses our path.

Now I think we learn, from what has been traced in Nehemiah, that as the darkness increases so does the blessing of the soul that is faithful to God. 2 Chronicles 30: 26 confirms what I have just said. There we find that the joy at Hezekiah's passover exceeded all since the days of Solomon. Then we read in 2 Chronicles 35: 18 that the passover kept in the days of Josiah surpassed any since the days of Samuel; but what is said of the feast in Nehemiah's day,

which the returned captives held after the wall of the city was finished? It excelled any since the days of Joshua, the son of Nun; "and there was very great gladness." There had been no feast of booths since the first that Israel kept when they entered the land. It was the brightest point in all the history of God's ancient people for the one who was faithful to God, though the surrounding darkness was greater than at any other stage of their history. So, no matter what the difficulty, there is joy as deep, for the saint who will do God's will, in the days of decline, as in the first days when all was as God set it up.

What a comfort this is for us! Then let nothing hinder us; for if we make Christ our object, and "have a mind to work," our joy and blessing will be as great as was that of the Pentecostal saints, when *all* were *filled* with the Holy Ghost, and gladness and singleness of heart was characteristic of each one of them.

"I will never leave thee,
Never thee forsake;"
At Thy words, Lord Jesus,
We fresh courage take.
All may seem against us,
Everything give way;
Thou, O God, art for us,
Thou dost win the day.
Every source may fail us
In the deadly strife;
Thou, Lord, still remainest
Our eternal life.
Blest with every blessing
In Thyself above,
There in fullest favour
Loved with perfect love.
"I will never leave thee,

Never thee forsake;"
At Thy words, Lord Jesus,
We fresh courage take.