

Nehemiah

F. B. Hole.

Table of Contents

Nehemiah 1.....	1
Nehemiah 2.....	2
Nehemiah 3.....	4
Nehemiah 4.....	5
Nehemiah 5.....	7
Nehemiah 6.....	8
Nehemiah 7.....	9
Nehemiah 8.....	10
Nehemiah 9 and Nehemiah 10.....	11
Nehemiah 11.....	14
Nehemiah 12.....	14
Nehemiah 13.....	15

Nehemiah 1

IN THE FIRST chapter we find ourselves carried to the 20th year of Artaxerxes, whereas Ezra went to Jerusalem in the 7th year of that king. Nehemiah was not a priest, but he was at Shushan the palace in an official capacity. His story begins when certain Jews arrived, who had knowledge of the condition of things prevailing then at Jerusalem, and he enquired of them as to the state of the remnant that had returned there years before. and as to the conditions prevailing in the city. The answer of these men is given to us in verse 3.

Their report was a distressful one. Jerusalem as a city was still in a ruinous state, and the people there in great affliction and reproach. The effect this news had upon Nehemiah is related in the rest of the chapter. We venture to think it should also have a very definite effect upon us.

We have just seen in the book of Ezra how under God-fearing men, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, a remnant had returned and rebuilt the temple, and though defection supervened in the course of years, the coming of Ezra led to a distinct reformation; yet now, thirteen years after, they are marked by affliction and reproach. We might have expected that instead of this God would have rewarded them by visible tokens of His approval and favour.

The next book, that of Esther, relates for us things that happened to the much larger number of Jews, that did not concern themselves with God's interests in His temple, but preferred to remain in the land of their captivity, where in the course of the seventy years many of them had settled down in comparative prosperity. The name of God is not mentioned in Esther, and we might have expected that these easy-going folk would have come under His displeasure. What do we find? Read Esther 9: 17-19, and see. The people who, in spite of their defects, had cared for God's interests and rebuilt His temple, marked by affliction and reproach; while those who did not concern themselves, remaining in their comforts, have 'feasting', 'gladness', and 'a good day'.

What instruction shall we gather from this extraordinary and, we venture to think, this unexpected contrast? Well, in the first place, worldly prosperity and jollification, even if the fruit of God's care and dealings behind the scenes, is not necessarily an indication of His approval, nor is affliction a sign of His disapproval, as is seen in far more striking degree in the case of Job. Secondly, we may refer to what is stated in Hebrews 12: 6, 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth'. If we read Psalm 73, we find the same problem exercising the mind of the writer. He saw those who definitely were wicked prospering, while the godly were chastened. It was when he went into the sanctuary of God that he found the solution.

Nehemiah of course had not the light that the New Testament sheds upon this problem, so the sad tidings concerning, 'the remnant that are left', affected him deeply, for in spirit he was of them, though not actually with them. He was moved to tears, mourning, fasting and prayer. The report he had heard was mainly concerned with the outward circumstances of the remnant, rather than with their inward spiritual state, but it moved him to these four things.

And what about present day conditions among the true saints of God? Many are in outward affliction under the iron hand of Communism or Romanism, while in the English-speaking world the increased inflow of money into our pockets seems to have produced a decreased outflow of love and devotion from our souls. Have these four things ever marked us? Have we ever mourned to tears over the thousands of our fellow-saints persecuted and even martyred in this twentieth century? Have we ever abstained from lawful things and given ourselves to prayer on their behalf? The writer leaves each reader to answer these questions for himself. He knows quite well what he would have to reply.

The prayer of Nehemiah, though shorter than Ezra's, is very similar. He too identified himself with the sin of the people, saying, 'we have sinned'. But in one direction he went further, pleading the word of the Lord, that had been written in Leviticus 26. Israel had been warned that disobedience to the law would bring upon themselves a scattering; but that even then if they turned to God in obedience to His word, He would gather them from distant lands and restore them to the place of His name. On this, which had been written, he based his plea. For those in Jerusalem and for himself he made the claim that they were those, 'who desire to fear Thy name'.

While making request in a more general way for the returned remnant in Jerusalem, he had a more definite request to make for himself. He was in a post of special responsibility before the king, and having access to his presence, he intended to make a request of the monarch that he might very naturally entirely refuse. He sought therefore that God would prosper him in that which he had in mind.

Nehemiah 2

THE KING'S CUP-BEARER of those days had to be a man of integrity, who would see that nothing undesirable or poisonous was inserted into the King's wine. The tidings he had just received had so affected him that his sorrow was seen in his face. Noticing it, the king was of course suspicious and enquired what moved him to sorrow; as we see in the opening verses of chapter 2. A position was thus created that had definite danger in it, and Nehemiah was 'very sore afraid'. However, he told the king of the tidings that he had received, which accounted for his sad countenance that had revealed the sadness of his heart.

The king did show him mercy as he had desired, and invited a request from him. This was a challenge, and Nehemiah's response to it is very instructive. The record is, first, 'So I prayed to the God of heaven', and then, 'I said to the king . . .' God first, and the king second. This silent prayer must have

shot up to heaven in a matter of two or three seconds, quite unknown to the king or anybody else, and it was evidently as speedily answered from heaven, so that the request he made was the right one, and to meet with a favourable answer.

Would to God that we and all other true saints of God were so truly and simply living in touch with our Lord on high that in any and every emergency, needing a quick decision, we could at once with a minimum of words, remit the case to Him for His decision, and guidance for ourselves. We should more often see His hand moving on our behalf, even as for Nehemiah: as the rest of the story unfolds.

Invited by the king to make a request, Nehemiah asked, with due deference, that he might be permitted to go to Jerusalem with the king's authority to rebuild it; that authority to be expressed in letters, not only to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, but also to governors beyond the river. The 'river' here is doubtless the Euphrates, and so the governors were those that ruled in the direction of Palestine. What considerations moved the king's mind are hidden from us, that we may more clearly realize that, whatever they were, it was the power of God that controlled him, in response to Nehemiah's brief and sudden prayer.

The king was so favourable to Nehemiah's request that he sent captains and horsemen to speed him on his way. We may remember that though Ezra had returned earlier under the same king, carrying much treasure under his authority, he had not requested such official protection, since he had openly avowed his faith in the protection of God during his journey. Evidently Nehemiah, an official in the king's court, had not the spiritual education and understanding that Ezra possessed as a priest, devoted to the law of his God, yet both equally could speak of 'the good hand of my God upon me.' If the heart be right, God will guide and support His servant, whatever be the measure of his intelligence and faith. This fact should encourage us today. Our faith and understanding may indeed be small, but let us see that our hearts are marked by true devotion to Christ and His present interests. As the fruit of devotion, intelligence will surely increase.

But, immediately there is action, as the result of devotion and some understanding, opposition is sure to appear. It had been so when at the start of the revival Zerubbabel and his party went back; it was so again, as verse 10 reveals, though the men who led the opposition were different. Sanballat was an Horonite; that is, we understand, an inhabitant of Horonaim, a town of Moab; while Tobiah was an Ammonite. So here we have representatives of the two sons of Lot, begotten under shameful circumstances, as recorded in Genesis 19, setting themselves against what God was doing. A man had come 'to seek the welfare of the children of Israel', which at that moment God had in view, and therefore the adversary was against it, and used these two men, who as to their origins were distant relations of Israel. It has often been the case, sad to say, that those nearly related to the saints of God have been foremost in their opposition against them.

It is worthy of note that this antagonism existed before Nehemiah revealed the exact purpose for which he had come. He abode in Jerusalem three days and then he arose secretly in the night and made a tour of the city that he might see for himself the exact state of things. The rulers of the Jews, as we are told in verse 16, had no knowledge of what he did, nor of the plan before him. It was only when he had seen the state of things for himself, that he set before them what he proposed, and said, 'let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.'

The building of the wall was then the great object before him. The house of the Lord had already been built, but it stood in a desolated place, the walls of which were broken down and its gates consumed by fire. The day had not come then, nor has it come yet, when 'the Lord will be unto her a

wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her' (Zech. 2: 5), so a wall was needed that the city might again be seen as the place where God had set His name, and His house might, in this typical way, be separated from the defilements of the surrounding world. From the time that God said to Abram, 'Get thee out . . . ' (Gen. 12: 1), separation to Himself has always been God's mind for His people. Since the rejection of Christ this has come to light with increased emphasis, so that we now read, 'the friendship of the world is enmity with God' (James 4: 4).

Having proposed the rebuilding of the wall, Nehemiah was able to tell the rulers, 'of the hand of my God, which was good upon me.' This plainly conveyed to them that God was behind the project, and they responded, saying, 'Let us rise up and build.' They were prepared really to put their hands to the work. Pious thoughts and understanding are not enough. They had to put their hands to the task, and work. It is even thus with us today. To understand God's mind and purpose is not enough; we must be prepared to give ourselves to the active service which is indicated. Here, we fear, is a very weak spot in many Christian lives.

As it became increasingly plain that work was really going to be undertaken, so the opposition increased, and in verse 19 we find Geshem the Arabian joining with the Maobite and the Ammonite. This is remarkable for the inhabitants of Arabia were largely the descendants of Ishmael and Esau, and to this day the bitterest foes of the Jews are the various Arab tribes. And further, in prophetic scriptures Edom, Moab and Ammon are linked together. In the coming day, according to Daniel 11: 41, the king of the north will overthrow many lands, but these three will escape him; only to be subdued by Israel, regathered and unified, according to Isaiah 11: 14.

In our chapter, however, the opposition for the moment only took the form of mockery-'they laughed us to scorn, and despised us.' This type of opposition all too often has considerable effect, even upon the people of God; but only if they are living and acting as before men. Nehemiah and his friends were acting as before God in what they proposed to do, as we see in the last verse of our chapter. Their reply was, 'The God of heaven, He will prosper us.' They anticipated in their measure the triumphant word of Romans 8: 31. 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' In the light of that they were about to act; and they reminded the adversaries how complete was the breach that lay between them and themselves.

We may take the three things that Nehemiah mentioned as having an application at the present time. It is as true today as when the Psalmist wrote, that 'men of the world', who so often oppose Christ and His saints, 'have their portion in this life' (Ps. 17: 14), and no portion at all in the things of God. Hence in these things they have no 'right', and their thoughts and opinions are valueless. Nor, when the things of God are finally established in glory, will they have any 'memorial' therein. They will be outside it all for ever. Let us never be diverted from the work of God, nor even ashamed, by the ridicule of men, who oppose Christ and His service.

Nehemiah 3

CHAPTER 3 is occupied with details concerning the actual building of the wall, but in it are placed on record some things that are of interest to us today. We note first of all, that God has seen fit to occupy a whole chapter in recording the names of the leaders of families or town ships, who engaged in it. We might wonder that so much valuable space should be taken up with the names of men, who would otherwise be forgotten. We deduce from it however the fact that the humblest service for the will of God is not forgotten but put on record, especially when carried on in the face of ridicule and opposition.

The whole chapter appears to us as like a miniature forecast of the judgment-seat of Christ. This is specially so, when we read verses 5, 12, 20, 23 and 27. The Tekoites were very diligent, for they repaired 'another piece', as well as the first they undertook; yet it is recorded that 'their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord'. All too often worldly elevation proves a hindrance when the work of the Lord is in question. Their 'nobles', no doubt liked to talk and direct, but did not like to soil their hands, nor bend their necks, to do the work.

On the other hand, there was Shallum, who was ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, putting his hand to the work, and not only he but his daughters also. This was indeed remarkable, for building operations do not fall within the sphere of women's work. They were, however, sufficiently in earnest to take part in it, though what they did may have been of a lighter sort and not so conspicuous. These 'daughters' remind us of the two women who 'laboured with Paul 'in the Gospel', according to Philippians 4: 2, 3 What counts with God is not the apparent importance or unimportance of the work we do, but the devotion and earnestness that moves us to do it. So the work of these daughters, whatever it was, has a place in the record, and similar devotion and work in the present interests of the Lord, will find mention and reward at the judgment-seat of Christ.

This thought is reinforced by the case of Baruch the son of Zabbai, for it is recorded that he 'earnestly repaired the other piece'. He was evidently marked by unusual zeal, and it is noted and placed on the record: just as it is recorded of some of the workers, including even some of the priests, that they repaired 'against their house', which of course meant that they concerned themselves with the section that was of most interest and convenience to themselves. To do this was not so praise-worthy as to work on some piece of no particular interest to the worker; or perhaps even repulsive, as for instance, the repairing of the 'dung gate', undertaken by a man who was a ruler of part of a township, as is recorded in verse 14.

So the reading of this chapter should remind us that today we are called to serve the Lord's interests, either by building or maintaining the wall of separation, that surrounds God's present 'house', which is the church of God, protecting it from the defilements of 'this present evil world'. It should remind us also of the truth stated by the godly woman, Hannah, in her prayer, placed on record in 1 Samuel 2, that, 'The Lord is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed'. When our actions, as we seek to serve the Lord, are weighed, how will they appear-weighty, or of little worth?

Nehemiah 4

WHEN THE WORK of building was really started, the anger and opposition of the adversaries was much increased, as chapter 4 records. All this was expressed in a threefold way. First there was mockery. The Jews were indeed feeble and their work of reviving 'the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned', did seem a fantastic enterprise, and the adversaries made the most of it by way of ridicule. But further there was misrepresentation, regarding the objects before them in their work; and then the opposition took an active form in preparation to intervene by force, and fight against them.

We may trace similar opposition by the great adversary in this our Gospel age. We see it in the service of the Apostle Paul. Delivering his message in cultured Athens, he was derided as a 'babbler', (Acts 17: 18). Again before Festus he was considered 'mad' (Acts 26: 24). Here was ridicule. In Thessalonica there was misrepresentation, for he was imagined to be turning 'the world upside down', and doing things, 'contrary to the decrees of Caesar' (Acts 17: 6, 7). Neither assertion was true. The Gospel leaves the world-system untouched, but calls individuals out of the world, turning them right

side up, according to God. Then the violent opposition of the adversary was seen in the sufferings he had to endure, a list of which he was inspired to place on record in 2 Corinthians 11: 24-27. If we in our day were more energetic and more faithful in our service for the Lord Jesus, we should doubtless know more of all three things.

In the latter part of the chapter we learn the measures that were taken in the presence of all this. First of all there was prayer made to God, as verse 9 records. A very right move! Nehemiah began with prayer, as we saw at the start of the story, and in a prayerful spirit they continued. Have we not often made the mistake in some emergency of taking certain steps that to us seemed reasonable and prudent, and then praying afterwards that God would bless what we have done. In His mercy He may so bless. but we should have done better if we had prayed first.

Then they faced the difficulties of the work. There was much rubbish that hindered and caused the strength of workers to fail, and the adversaries prepared to attack them. We venture to draw an analogy here. Their work was one of revival-reviving the wall that separated the temple of God from the outside world. In the mercy of God various revivals have been granted in the history of the professing church, and every time there has been more or less 'rubbish', that needed to be removed. What a terrible accumulation of worldly and moral rubbish, for instance, had been heaped up by Papal Rome, during the thousand years or more, that preceded the revival, that we speak of as the Reformation. And not all by any means, was actually removed then; the strength of the workers failed before it was accomplished. We Christians have always to watch against the accumulation of this kind of rubbish.

Then the opponents threatened actual attack of a violent sort, and against this the Jews armed themselves. In their case of course such arms as the world then used -spears, swords, etc.-were taken both by the would-be attackers and the defenders. In our age the more dangerous form of attack is of a spiritual sort. Servants of God, even in our day, have been slain, but 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church', which has been proved again and again. The sword to be used, in meeting the spiritual attack, is 'the word of God', as plainly declared in Ephesians 6: 17, where the spiritual conflict is stressed.

In English-speaking lands, where religious liberty is freely granted, the conflict side of Christian life is apt to be overlooked, and the idea entertained that our pilgrimage to a joyous heaven is to be happy and serene. But such is not the prospect held out in Scripture. We are not only pilgrims but also disciples, who are called to take up our cross in following our rejected Lord, and as identified with Him, conflict is inevitable. As 'a good soldier of Jesus Christ' we are to 'endure hardness' (2 Tim. 2: 3), consequently the protective armour of Ephesians 6 is needed, as well as the 'sword of the Spirit', for offensive action.

The courage that marked Nehemiah and his helpers is seen very clearly in verse 14; a courage which sprang from the call to 'remember the Lord, which is great and terrible', who was on their side. The result was that the building of the wall did not cease, though perhaps it proceeded more slowly, since defence was necessary. The workers, whether bearers of burdens or builders, had to carry weapons, and so each had only one hand for the work, the other holding a sword. Thus it is stated in verse 17.

Thus too it has been during the church's history, even to our own times. True servants of God have always had to spend a substantial portion of their time and energy in defence of the truth. From the beginning the apostles had not only to evangelize and teach the truth; they had to spend much time in defending it from the attacks of the adversary, as the epistles bear witness. There was, if we

remember aright, not so long ago a magazine entitled 'Sword and Trowel', produced by the well known C. H. Spurgeon, who with all his preaching gift had to contend earnestly for the faith in his closing days. The title of the magazine was doubtless taken from the chapter we are considering. The truth is worth contending for. If we lose it we lose practically everything. So let us each see to it that in a spiritual sense we have a sword in one hand, while in the other we have a trowel, wherewith to do the work of the Lord.

At the end of our chapter we notice another thing. Beside the sword and the trowel there was the trumpet, which was to be blown when an alarm was necessary. The work was great and large, so that the workers were widely separated, one from the other, yet they were one in the work, and not a number of disconnected individuals. Hence what endangered one endangered all, and their unity in the work was to be preserved. Here again we see an important lesson, that we very much need to bear in mind, in order to act on it.

This oneness of action in the service of God is specially important for us, and that for two reasons. First, because the oneness of saints today, brought into the church of God, is much more fully stressed than it was with the twelve tribes of Israel. This is seen in the Ephesian epistle-read Eph. 2: 14-18, where the word 'one' occurs four times; and Eph. 4: 3-6, where it occurs seven times. Second, because the present service of God is so varied, as we see in 1 Corinthians 12. There is great diversity in the unity, so that the human body is used to illustrate it, and no one member can dispense with the service of another without damage and loss. The trumpet on the walls of Jerusalem reminds us that if the enemy set himself to attack one of the small groups of workers, he was really attacking all.

In the closing verse of our chapter we get a glimpse of the great zeal and devotion that characterized Nehemiah and his helpers. All of them were to lodge inside Jerusalem, thus obtaining such protection as the partly built walls could offer, and none of them put off their clothes, so as to sleep with comfort by night, though they removed them for personal cleanliness. They were therefore always ready to labour in the work and to meet the foe. A very impressive picture!

Vigilance and purity are two things very necessary for us. We see them impressed on Timothy by Paul. If we read 2 Timothy 2: 21, we find he was to be vigilant as to error of a fundamental sort, and 'purge' himself out from it. Then, reading the next verse, we find he was to 'flee also youthful lusts', so that his personal cleanliness might be maintained, in a spiritual way.

And the instructions given to Timothy in the first century are in this twentieth century equally important for us.

Nehemiah 5

WE HAVE NOTICED certain good features that marked the people, as recorded in chapter 4, but as we commence to read chapter 5, we discover that beneath the surface sad mischief had been at work. Under Nehemiah's leadership there had been a courageous attitude towards opposition from without, while all the time there was selfish oppression proceeding within. The richer Jews had taken advantage of the plight into which many poorer ones had drifted, owing to the shortage of the necessaries of life, borrowing money or raising mortgages, in order to obtain food for themselves and their families. We might summarize the situation by saying that while externally they presented a picture of commendable zeal, in doing what was God's service at that moment, internally they were guilty of much self-seeking and corruption.

The Apostle Paul reminded Timothy that the 'Holy Scriptures', which he had known 'from a

child',-the Old Testament, therefore-were able to make him 'wise unto salvation' (2 Tim. 3: 15); not only from future doom, but also from the dangers that infest our pilgrim path. Here, we think, is an illustration of this, for again and again even in our day, the work of God in revival amongst His saints has been damaged in similar fashion. Whilst outwardly the work of God has been carried on with diligence and success, even in building a wall of spiritual separation from the outside world; there has grown up the spirit of self-seeking within, and consequently of damage and impoverishment to many humbler saints. Is not this the reason why gracious revivals, that have visited the English speaking regions during the past four centuries, have lost their power and gradually faded away?

So, in the light of what is here recorded, let us all accept the warning, and try our ways before our Lord. In the case before us the situation was met for a time by the faithful energy of Nehemiah. He was angry, with the kind of anger that is to be permitted, as Ephesians 4: 26 indicates, and he called upon them to act 'in the fear of God', even if they did not fear the retribution of men. Faced by Nehemiah's searching words, they had nothing to say. They admitted the charge, and under an oath they undertook to restore what they had taken away, and this they did according to the 13th verse.

What added force to Nehemiah's indignant charge was that he himself had been so careful in this matter, as we see in the verses that follow. Former governors had exacted their food and support from the people. He on the contrary had taken nothing from them, and had supported 150 Jews and rulers, besides occasional visitors. Just how he did this we are not told, but presumably he drew his supplies from the Persian monarch. When rebuke is called for, the power of it is greatly increased when the one administering it is wholly free of the error he has to rebuke. The same principle stands when the happy work of restoration has to be undertaken, as we see in Galatians 6: 1-'considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted'. Either way, the call to consider ourselves and our own ways is very insistent, when dealing with others. This integrity also gave Nehemiah confidence in calling upon God for good, as the last verse of the chapter shows.

Nehemiah 6

CHAPTER 6 DISCLOSES to us that, as the building of the wall neared completion the opposition from without was intensified, and took on more subtle forms. The first we might characterize as compromise, with a desire to inflict hurt, in this case evidently mischief of a personal sort. The request that there should be a conference in some village on the plain of Ono seemed reasonable enough then. In our day such a conference would have a special appeal, for all over the world nations and even tribes are full of disputes, and conferences continually take place, in order that, by some measure of compromise on both sides, open conflict may be avoided. Present-day statesmen would be very sympathetic to the suggestion of Sanballat and his friends.

But, when the truth of God or the work of God is in question, compromise is not to be entertained. The servant of God today may not fear physical mischief, but he knows that what is of God is not subject to human arrangement, however plausible such a compromise may appear to be.

The adversaries were persistent for they sent four times, and even a fifth, when they altered their tactics and resorted to lying misrepresentation. They accused him of desiring to throw off the Persian yoke and make himself a king. Similar tactics were employed by adversaries in the early days of the Gospel. Paul, for instance, was accused of being, 'a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world' (Acts 24: 5); and even in our day quite untrue charges have been levelled against preachers of the Gospel. These untrue charges against Nehemiah occasioned fear, though they knew them to be untrue, but in verse 9 we see that they only cast him afresh upon God. If opposition today casts us upon

God, we shall ultimately profit thereby.

Verses 10-13, show us that the adversaries tried a third device, perhaps more crafty and subtle than the earlier ones. They hired a Jew, one of Nehemiah's own people, to alarm him as to his own danger of assassination, urging him to protect himself by doing something which would have been reprehensible according to his own religion. Not being one of the priests, to enter the temple and hide there was not permissible for him. If compromise and false accusation had not succeeded in moving him, they hoped to accomplish it by entrapping him in a sin against the law of his God. But perceiving their wickedness, and calling again upon his God, this snare too was avoided by this God-fearing man.

How often have many of us, who seek to serve the Lord in this our day, been entrapped in somewhat similar fashion when opposed, committing ourselves in spirit, in word, in action to what is really sin against Him. If we would be delivered from entanglement in any of these three ways, let us keep in touch with God, as we see Nehemiah doing in this chapter. There is every reason for us to do so, since on the basis of His death and resurrection we are brought into such near and loving relationship with Him.

We must note verse 14, for it records the distressing fact that certain men who were prophets among the people, and even a prophetess, were in league, with the adversaries and acting with them. Enemies of God's work, of a more secret sort, and even amongst the professed people of God, are really more dangerous to the work of God than opponents of an open sort. God, however, was behind the work on the wall, and so it was duly finished, as verses 15 and 16 record, in spite of all the antagonism and craft employed against the work, so that the enemies were cast down, seeing that God was in it.

The closing verses of the chapter again emphasize what appears to have been the main difficulty. Betrayal on the part of leaders within was worse than opposition from without. And, what led to this state of affairs? Marriage alliances with the enemy had taken place on the part of some, and the wish to smooth matters over was consequently very natural on the part of the transgressors. Ever since God said to Abram, 'Get thee out', (Gen. 12: 1), these forbidden marriages had been a great snare. We have sadly to confess that it has not been otherwise in the history of the church.

As we read Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, we might marvel at the number and variety of the disorders he had to refer to, and utter rebuke. What was the underlying cause? We believe this is reached in his second epistle, 2 Cor. 6: 11-18. At this point the Apostle's heart was enlarged and his mouth opened to indicate with plainness the weak spot. It was the way in which they had accepted the 'unequal', or 'diverse', yoke with unbelievers. The believer, born of God, has a nature which the unbeliever does not possess. At the same time he has within him the flesh, the old nature, which the unbeliever possesses. Hence if the diverse yoke be accepted, the believer is almost certain to be pulled in the direction of the world, and adopt some, if not many, of its ways. So let us today watch our ways, in the light of this plain New Testament scripture, lest we are guilty of a sin, which is similar to that which troubled Nehemiah in his day.

Nehemiah 7

WE HAVE a sense of relief as we commence chapter 7, since we at once discover that there were those, who far from hindering the work of God at that moment, were real helpers in the work. The wall was finished, in spite of the difficulties, the doors set up and officials appointed, that the gates might be opened and shut as would be suitable. In this connection Hanani, whom Nehemiah calls 'my brother', is again mentioned. He it was who brought the first tidings of the sad state of the city and the Jews, as

narrated in Nehemiah 1: 2. He is linked here with Hananiah, a ruler in the city, who is characterized as 'a faithful man', who 'feared God above many'. Since 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge' (Prov. 1: 7), we may be sure that this man since he had progressed above many in it, had developed wise knowledge in a substantial measure. To have had such men, identifying themselves with him in his service, must have been an encouragement, granted to him by God. Such encouragement he needed for, as verse 4 records, the city was large, the people few, and though the wall was complete the houses were not as yet built.

Israel being God's earthly people, their genealogies were of importance and had to be carefully preserved. God having stirred the heart of Nehemiah on this matter, he found that a careful register had been made years before, when the first migration took place, as recorded at the beginning of the book of Ezra, and in view of its importance we have the register again recorded. Ezra 2: 1-67, is repeated almost word for word in our chapter, verses 6-69. Then the four verses that close our chapter concerning the gifts of the chief of the fathers and of the people more generally, do differ from the record of the closing verses of Ezra 2. The much larger gifts recorded here are accounted for, we presume, by later gifts that had accrued up to Nehemiah's time. The title 'Tirshatha' applied to Nehemiah as well as to Zerubbabel. The gifts were large, and the priests and people were in their cities.

Nehemiah 8

THEN, AS THE last verse of the chapter tells us, came the seventh month; and chapter 8 opens with the record of how the people were gathered together in the street before the water gate. Ezra the priest had been in Jerusalem for a number of years, but he now was called upon to bring the book of the law of the Lord and read it publicly before both men and women, and indeed before all who could understand it, which must have meant even children of maturer years. The word of God concerns everybody who has a mind capable of understanding it.

This public reading was a great occasion, and it furnishes us with some valuable instruction, particularly for those who minister the word in a public way. Ezra stood upon a pulpit, so that both he and the book out of which he read, were in full view of the people, and others helped to make the meaning plain to all who listened. If any of our readers engage in the public preaching of the Gospel or the ministry of the word to believers, we would ask them to read verse 8, and carefully note three words in it.

In the first place the book was read distinctly. What was written in the one precious book was clearly to reach the ears of the people, for they had no copies of it in their hands, which would enable them to check any mumbled or indistinct utterance. Secondly, they gave the sense, for during a thousand years the language may have altered somewhat, and many may have spoken the Aramaic and been unlearned in the ancient Hebrew. Thirdly, they made certain that the hearers really did understand the reading. How remarkably this verse anticipates the instructions given in 1 Corinthians 14, in regard to what is uttered in the Christian assembly. He who gives thanks, or prays, or ministers the word, is to make sure, not only that he himself really knows what he is saying, but that also he says it in such a way that it is understood, and therefore can be assimilated, and endorsed by the saying of 'Amen', by those who hear him. The speaker may say, 'I understood quite well what I wanted to convey.' We however, have to reply, 'Yes, but did you speak with sufficient distinctness and simplicity, that your hearers got the sense and with clear understanding grasped your message?' A reference to our understanding occurs eight times in 1 Corinthians 14: 9-20.

The first effect upon the people of this reading is revealed in verse 9-the people were moved to

tears; and well they might be, for no one can face the demands of God's holy law without a sense of condemnation entering the conscience. Both Nehemiah and Ezra however stilled the people and bade them rejoice, for in the book there were of course the promises of God, showing mercy and predicting the Messiah, and further the Feast of Tabernacles was at hand, which was intended to be a season of happiness. They were entitled, of course, to rejoice in all that God had wrought on their behalf in spite of all the efforts of their adversaries. But we have wondered whether this switching of the emotions of the people from conviction and sorrow to eating and drinking and making 'great mirth', because they had understood, was really of God. Conviction of conscience is not easily reached, and consequently repentance is shallow all too often, though it is true of course that 'the joy of the Lord' imparts strength. There is however a great difference between that joy and making great mirth as one eats and drinks. The day will declare whether this successful direction of the leaders was really of God or not.

There was however on the part of the leaders a real desire to read and understand the directions of the law, as verse 13 records, and the original directions as to the feast of Tabernacles came clearly before them. This resulted in taking action to observe the feast as it had been written. The statement of verse 17, that this feast had not been so observed since the days of Joshua, might fill us with astonishment did we not know how easily and swiftly a decline from the instructions of the word of God can take place. When King Josiah moved the people in his day to keep the Passover, the record is that, 'there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet' (2 Chr. 35: 18). This was an earlier exhibition of the same tendency, though not quite so extreme a case.

And what has taken place in the sad history of the professing church? We cannot, in this connection, throw stones at the people of Israel. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, we have revealed the great facts that govern the life and activities of the church as the body of Christ, followed by the commandments of the Lord, to be obeyed in the exercise of spiritual gifts, so that all may profit. For how long were they remembered and obeyed? Not for long. Soon other arrangements were made, which led in the course of a few centuries to the fearful evils of the Papacy, and what are called the 'Dark Ages'. There was possibly some remembrance of the word of God amongst the humble, unknown, persecuted saints, whom the Popes branded as 'heretics', but that was all, as many centuries passed. So we are not surprised at what is recorded in verse 17 of our chapter.

In the last verse of our chapter and the opening verses of Nehemiah 9, we see that this reading of the book of the law, which started when Ezra mounted the pulpit, did not end there. It continued through the seven days of the feast, and even beyond. It lay at the root of such measure of revival as occurred at that time, and thus, we believe, it has always been. The revival that came to a head in the sixteenth century, sprang largely from the fact that the Scriptures had begun to be translated out of dead languages into languages that were alive, coupled with the invention of printing, that enabled countless thousands to read them. And so it has been again and again since that time.

Nehemiah 9 and Nehemiah 10

IN VERSES 2 and 3, we see the effect which the reading of the law had upon the hearers. First, they separated themselves from all the entanglements with 'strangers', or 'foreigners', that they had been permitting. Secondly, they confessed their own sins, as well as the iniquities in which their fathers had been involved. Then thirdly, they honoured their God, by worshipping Him. They recognized that the word of the Lord, which they read, demanded obedience.

And this indeed is what we have to recognize. It is worthy of note that the epistle to the Romans, which, in its opening verses calls for obedience to the Gospel when it is preached, ends with the

assertion that the 'mystery', which concerns Christ and the church, equally calls for 'the obedience of faith.' All the truth of God is revealed, not to provide us with philosophical ideas for the entertainment of our minds, but rather while entering mind and conscience, to lead us into happy obedience, as those brought into subjection to the will of God. This will certainly lead us into a life of separation from all that entangles and defiles, and also confession of failure and sin.

These two things must accompany each other. To separate without confession is not acceptable to God: neither is it acceptable if we confess without separating. When both are combined we are humbled before God, and brought into that state of mind and soul which befits us to take up our happy place as worshippers in the presence of God.

The worship that was offered to God through certain of the Levites is recounted in Nehemiah 9: 4-6. They confessed Jehovah as their God, and owned that He is the Great Creator of heaven and earth, and exalted above all earthly and heavenly praise. It was suited to the revelation of God, in the light of which they lived. If we read Ephesians 1: 3-7, we find the Apostle uttering worship in the light of the revelation that has reached us in Christ. And if we read Romans 11: 33-36, we find the same Apostle in the spirit of worship as he contemplated the end to which His dealings with Israel will bring them, as well as ourselves. The Levites of Nehemiah's day could not anticipate the things made known to us, 'upon whom the ends of the ages are come' (1 Cor. 10: 11, New Trans.).

Having owned the Lord, as they knew Him at that time, they proceeded to recite before Him the wonder of His dealings with their nation, from Abram onwards through the centuries. The chapter is a lengthy one, and if it be carefully read, their chequered history comes before us, and we cannot fail to be struck by three things. First, they vindicate God in all His disciplinary dealings with them, as well as acknowledge His mighty power, that had wrought on their behalf in their deliverance from Egypt, their sustainment in the wilderness and their possession of the promised land. In all His dealings, God had acted towards them according to both mercy and righteousness.

And, in the second place, owning that the law with its 'right judgments', and 'good statutes', was perfect in its place, they made no attempt to justify their ancestors or themselves in their repeated sins and failures. They condemned themselves for their disobedience, which went even to the length of slaying the prophets, by whom God had testified against them and maintained His truth; and they owned the rightness of all that had come upon them, so that, though back in the land, they were still in a position of servitude to kings who were over them. This humble confession of sin was indeed good, equally with the acknowledgement of the rightness of all God's dealings with them.

But there was a third thing, which comes to light in the last verse of the chapter. Owning the 'great distress', that was still their portion, indeed because of it, they proposed to renew the old covenant of law, established originally with their ancestors, by making what they called 'a sure covenant', which they would write, and to which they would put their 'seal'.

So evidently they had not yet learned what the Apostle Paul so forcibly set before the Galatians-'As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse' (Gal. 3: 10). The full period of Man's probation had not yet expired. Israel was the nation chosen of God in whom that probation, or testing, was to take place, and it did not end until they had crucified their Messiah. So we are not blaming these God fearing Israelites for again making a covenant on the original lines of the law, and putting their seal to it, in the hope that they would succeed better than their fathers in keeping it.

We shall do well to note, however, what transpired in their later history. We shall not conclude our reading of this book without finding grievous failure recorded: and if we pass on to the book of the prophet Malachi, written perhaps half a century after this time, we find that a most deplorable state of

things had developed amongst their children and descendants. There was still a certain amount of outward religious profession, while the law itself was broken, the whole spirit of it perverted, and the transgressors themselves completely self-satisfied and intolerant of criticism: so much so, that they repudiate with indignation any accusation that the prophet had to bring against them in the name of the Lord.

There was, however, a spirit of revival, clearly at work among the people, and since their place and standing before God was on the basis of the law of Moses, some fresh resolution to reverence and obey it was the appropriate thing they had to offer. There have been moments of revival in the history of the church, graciously granted by God, but what has marked them has been some fresh recovery, not of what we ought to do for God, but of what He has done for us—some fresh understanding and realization of the fulness of the grace into which we have been brought by the Gospel, and to the place of favour and heavenly relationship which is the church's portion, according to the eternal counsels and purposes of God.

In this long prayer of confession, as they reviewed the history of their nation, we find that twice they acknowledged one of the great root causes of their sin: their forefathers had, 'dealt proudly' (verses 16 and 29). Out of this spirit of pride, helped on doubtless by the very privilege and favour in which they stood as a nation, sprang the self-assertion and disobedience that had characterized their whole history; and that in their early days came to a head in the fact that they 'appointed a captain to return to their bondage' (verse 17), and when they 'made them a molten calf and said, This is thy God' (verse 18).

As a matter of history, the calf preceded the captain, for it was made at Sinai, when Moses was for so long on the mountain, as recorded in Exodus 32; whereas the proposal to appoint a captain and return to Egypt was made when they were condemned to 40 years wandering in the wilderness after the bad report of the spies, as recorded in Numbers 14. In reversing the historic order, it would seem that they first mentioned the effect, and then went back to the underlying cause.

The inspired comment on all this is, 'So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief' (Heb. 3: 19). Unbelief wants a God plainly visible to the natural eye: hence the making of the calf. It also is not prepared to face a 40 year sojourn in a wilderness without visible resources: hence the desire for a captain after their own heart, to lead them back to a land of plenty, even if it be a land of slavery. It is easy for us to see their error, but let us not forget that the flesh in ourselves has exactly the same desires and tendencies. It longs for something visible, and for what panders to our natural desires, even if we are spiritually enslaved in obtaining it. Here is indeed a case in which the Old Testament Scriptures, which Timothy had known from a child, are able to make us 'wise unto salvation' (2 Tim. 3: 15).

We cannot indeed avoid the impression that similar evil principles were at work in the early centuries of the professing church. As faith vanished or declined, they wanted some visible representation of the Saviour, and then of His virgin mother. They wanted too a visible leader, who would relieve them of the troubles connected with the life of a stranger and a pilgrim in this present evil world, to which the Christian is called. As the centuries passed they got what they wanted in the crucifixes and images, and in the Papal chair, and its occupants, in Rome, that led them back into the spiritual bondage and darkness, of which Egypt was a type.

So the covenant was signed, which evidently reaffirmed their adherence to the old covenant, given at Sinai, which was indeed 'sure', in an absolute sense. They spoke of the covenant that they wrote and signed, as being sure, and so it was on God's side; but not so sure on their side, as we have already remarked. The first 27 verses of chapter 10, record the names of the leaders, who signed the

covenant on behalf of the people; and then the rest of that chapter records how the people generally bound themselves to observe the law as to questions of marriage, and of ordinances concerning the upkeep of the temple service, and of the priests and Levites. They had separated themselves to obey the law, and as it says, they 'entered into a curse'. Everyone who stands before God on the basis of law, enters into a curse. Significantly enough, the last word in the Old Testament is the word 'curse'.

Nehemiah 11

THE TWO VERSES that open chapter 11 may perhaps surprise us. We might have thought that, Jerusalem now being a walled city, there would have been strong competition among the people for the privilege of dwelling in it, but evidently it was not so. On the contrary, the country towns of Judah were more attractive, and therefore lots were cast, and one in ten of the people, on whom the lot fell, had to dwell in the city and if any offered themselves willingly to dwell there, the people blessed them, as though they made a sacrifice in so doing. The rest of the chapter puts on record the names of those who did dwell there, and also gives some details of their positions and the services they rendered. Their names may mean little to us, but may be important in the coming day of Israel's restoration and blessing.

What we may learn from it is surely this, that any sacrifice made, or service rendered, for God's work and interests is not forgotten but rather recorded before Him. The names of those who did not dwell in Jerusalem, but had more pleasure in the other places, are forgotten. Malachi tells us that in his day, 'a book of remembrance was written' before the Lord, 'for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name'. That book was not peculiar to Malachi's day. It existed in Nehemiah's day, and exists in our day too. Let us not forget that!

Nehemiah 12

THE FIRST 26 verses are occupied with further genealogical records, going back to the days of Zerubbabel and Jeshua the high priest. In verse 10, we learn that a grandson of Jeshua was Eliashib, who presently became high priest, and who had a son named, Joiada. These two are again mentioned in verse 22, and more concerning them appears in Nehemiah 13.

In the remaining verses of the chapter, though many names are mentioned, it is not a matter of genealogy but rather of the part they had in the celebration of God's mercy at the solemn dedication of the wall that had now been completed. On this joyous occasion those who dwelt outside Jerusalem were assembled, as well as those living within it. One thing, however, was necessary: a purification had to take place, not only of priests and Levites, but also of the people and the gates and the wall itself. This we learn in verse 30.

The lesson this has for us is obvious. We may state it in few words-No dedication without purification. We are not told how this cleansing was effected, but it was of course done in some outward and visible fashion, which after all is but the figure and shadow of that inward work of which David had some understanding, as we see in Psalm 51: 2, and again in Psalm 119: 9. To dedicate is to devote to God and to His service: the force of the word is very similar to the apostolic injunction, 'present your bodies a living sacrifice' (Rom. 12: 1). We, as redeemed, are not our own, and God claims our very bodies to be devoted to Him and His service.

If now we turn to the verse just quoted, we find the very next words to 'sacrifice' are, 'holy, acceptable unto God'. So here we are confronted by the same fact, what is dedicated to God must be

cleansed and holy; that is, separated from defilement unto Him. The first eight chapters of Romans unfold the Gospel, in all its wonderful details, and by that Gospel we are justified and cleansed, and set apart for God.

The purification effected, the dedication was marked by three things. First there was thanksgiving, and songs of praise to God. Second, there was great Joy amongst the people, as they sacrificed, so that 'the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off'. Third, there was the bringing in of 'the offerings, for the firstfruits, and for the tithes'. Here again, we can see an analogy: if true dedication marks us, God will receive His portion in praise and thanksgiving; we shall have joy of heart; there will be no lack of gifts for the support of the work of God and of His servants. How do we stand in relation to these things?

Nehemiah 13

IN SPITE OF these good features, marking the dedication of the wall things were not perfect. On that day they again read in the 'book of Moses', and found what had been written concerning their separation from the Ammonite and Moabite, in Deuteronomy 23. This led to a fresh concern as to the way they had failed in obedience, and a fresh separation from 'the mixed multitude', and further discovery of how, amongst leaders in their very midst, this instruction had been ignored.

Eliashib, mentioned in verse 4, was, as we have seen, a grandson of Jeshua the high priest, and was himself the high priest, as stated in verse 28 of this last chapter. So here, in what we may call the headquarters of their religion, was a flagrant violation of their law, for he had entered into alliance with Tobiah, one of the chief opponents of the work of God, and had prepared him a chamber in the precincts of the temple, just where the offerings and other treasures were stored. His dwelling there is even described as 'a great chamber'. If the visible head of their religious system thus transgressed, what could be expected of the common people?

How this came to pass is explained to us in verse 6. Twelve years had now passed since Nehemiah came to Jerusalem with authority to rebuild the city, and he had gone back to Artaxerxes, who had made him the civil governor; hence he was absent from Jerusalem for some time. Having, however, obtained leave of the king to go back, this was the situation that confronted him. It grieved him much and he acted at once, casting out Tobiah's stuff, cleansing the chamber, and restoring it to its proper use. But what a tragedy was this! Here was a man, who was no priest, having to rebuke and reverse the action of the man, who was 'the high priest'! This tragedy has, sad to say, often been repeated in the history of the church. There is no guarantee of purity and of obedience to the will of God in officialism. Again and again God has raised up men in low office, or even outside office altogether, to bring about some revival of obedience to His revealed will.

Nehemiah having returned, this incident as to Eliashib evidently stirred him to investigate other matters, and the rest of the chapter gives in detail the painful discoveries that he made. These wrongs and departures from the law are grouped under three main heads. There was first, slackness in providing for the upkeep of the Levites and the singers, and the upkeep of the house of God generally. The people did not want the expense and bother of bringing in their tithes in regular fashion. Second, there were grave and open infractions of the law regarding the sabbath. The people were breaking it themselves and permitting 'men of Tyre' and others to trade with them, even in Jerusalem itself: very convenient, no doubt; but flagrantly breaking the law. Then third, there was this repeated tendency to marry heathen wives asserting itself, so soon after a reformation on this point. And this time even more flagrant, for 'wives of Ashdod', a Philistine city, were in question as well as of Ammon and Moab.

In this last sin the priestly family was again prominent, as we see in verse 28. The unnamed son of Joiada, grandson of Eliashib, was a great-great-grandson of that Jeshua the high priest, concerning whom Zechariah the prophet had the remarkable vision, which he recorded in his prophecy: Zech. 3. If that chapter be read, we see that a promise was made to him, 'if thou wilt walk in My ways, and if thou wilt keep My charge'. Whatever the said Joshua (or, Jeshua) did, it is very certain that his descendants and successors neither walked in the ways of God, nor kept His charge. Nehemiah saw this and as to this son of Joiada, he 'chased him from me'.

We may learn the further lesson that departure from the will and way of God is what we may call, an infectious matter. The chapter begins with Eliashib striking up an alliance with Tobiah the Ammonite and it ends with his grandson making an even more intimate alliance, by marriage, to a daughter of Sanballat the Horonite, who was an even more prominent adversary; since Tobiah is introduced as 'the servant', in Nehemiah 2: 10. If departure from God and His word starts as only a trickle, it may soon become a torrent. May this also have the effect of making us 'wise unto salvation'.

Finally let us observe that just as Nehemiah has to record the three grave departures that brought him into violent conflict with many, as he rectified what was wrong, so three times does he call upon God to remember him for good, according to the greatness of His mercy. He did indeed speak of his 'good deeds', yet acknowledge that he relied upon 'mercy' rather than reward. See verses 14, 22, 31.

Our first impression might be that he was somewhat self-centred, or self-satisfied: but our second thought would rather be, that he was acutely conscious that his strong action to maintain the law of God had brought him into unpopularity and under censure from many. The martyr Stephen said. 'Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?' (Acts 7: 52). They had persecuted them all, and Nehemiah, though not a prophet, uttering words of censure, had committed many acts of censure, which would have brought on his head more obloquy than words would ever have done.

Nehemiah's whole commission from God involved controversy, not only from without, but also, and perhaps more bitterly, from within. He was conscious that, if remembered for good of his God, all earthly disparagement would count for little.

Does faithfulness to God involve us today in condemnation from the world, or even worldly believers? Let us then, only aim at being remembered for 'good', when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ.