

The beginning and the end of this book of Nehemiah are in striking contrast. At the beginning, we find a contented Hebrew whose temple is in ruins. At the end, we find the same Hebrew, his hands grimy, his face lined with care; but his sanctuary is resplendent. The message of this book might be applied in two ways. It is possible to think of God's city as represented by the Church, where, alas, there seems to be a cold disregard of spiritual things. On the other hand, we may think of the sanctuary in the hearts of God's children; that temple in the soul where the glory and power of God may not be as evident as the Lord would desire. The former is important; but if revival comes to the Church, God must send it. The revival in the individual heart is our responsibility, and should be our first concern. God may build the universal Church, but we are required to help. God may create stone, but He never makes a quarry. The Lord may supply the necessary requisites, but He never mixes cement! Certain tasks must inevitably be ours!

Consider His Prosperity

Nehemiah was a man who had every reason to be proud of himself. Admittedly he was a captive in an alien land, but even there he had advanced to stand in the king's presence. The ancient record reveals how he was held in high esteem, and was able to find favor with his illustrious master. Yet there is no evidence that prosperity had ruined his faith. On the contrary, there is reason to believe that if meetings were ever held in Babylon, this cup-bearer would have been present. He was no blatant idolator; he never bowed before an idol. Had he been examined regarding his theological outlook, he would have passed with honors. His danger came from lack of concern, a dreamy complacency, a complete absence of that spiritual passion which makes dwarfs giants! His temple had fallen into a state of disrepair, while he remained at ease. His soft, smooth hands matched the mood of his soul-until his complacency was suddenly shattered. Then he realized that something was wrong. Let it be admitted that only very strong saints can offset the challenge of prosperity. England was seldom closer to God than when enemy bombs were falling upon her cities. Need is the siren which sends a warning through the souls of men.

Consider His Pain

When he heard, "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire," he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Wonderful indeed are the tears which arise from a contrite heart. Blessed are those eyes which see and weep over the desolation of God's property. God may speak in the mind; but He dwells in the heart. Unless His glory shines from that sanctuary, even the most potent message is but an echo. We might well enquire if our walls need repair. It might be to our eternal profit to examine every inch of our Christian profession, to ascertain whether or not neglect has undermined our strength.

Consider His Prayer

Suddenly Nehemiah's skies became overcast, and the sun

NEHEMIAH ... a man concerned

ceased to shine. His prayer deserves consideration, for he said, "Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest bear 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: both I and my father's house have sinned. We have dealt very corruptly against thee . . ." (I :6, 7). A personal responsibility. Nehemiah identified himself with the sins of other people. He exclaimed, "we have sinned." This is the hall-mark of sincerity. Alas, many people condemned by the word of God endeavor to place the blame elsewhere. A persistent remorse. His concern reached to the depth of his being. This was not a mood soon to be forgotten: he had sinned, and the consciousness of his guilt continued until he prayed day and night. When wounds are deep, prayers are long; when God recognizes reality, His hands are quickly outstretched. A powerful resolve. The cure for sore knees is to take the weight from them! Tears may remove the dirt from our eyes; they never build walls. Unless our concern be followed by the consecration of our talents to the restoration of the sanctuary, we waste time in praying. Nehemiah saw and accepted a challenge. His glorious example should inspire us as we pick up our tools!

Melanchthon's Parable

When Martin Luther rebelled against the excessive authority of the Pope, and began to oppose the evil practices of his time, there were many other lesser-known people who fully shared his views. Although not in the fore-front of the theological battles which were soon raging in many centres, these men recognized in Luther's outbursts the expression of their own convictions. Melanchthon belonged to this number. Alas, as the reformation gained ground, certain men used the movement to propagate their own narrow teachings, and within a short while even the ranks of the reformers were filled with divisions. Melanchthon deplored the bitterness of the quarrels which followed, and in a supreme endeavor to make his contemporaries recognize the danger of their discontent, wrote a parable. He said, "There was a war between the wolves and the dogs. The wolves sent out a spy, to see how best they could defeat the dogs. Returning, the spy said, 'If we just leave them alone, they will defeat themselves. There are so many different kinds of dogs, one can hardly count them; and as for the worst of them, they are mostly little dogs who do a lot of barking but cannot bite. However, this I did observe and I could clearly see, that while they all hated us wolves, yet each dog suspected every other, and were constantly fighting each other.' The wolf was right; the dogs defeated themselves."

Many years have passed since the reformer wrote his strange parable, yet we could almost believe that he wrote it yesterday. Everywhere the cause of God seems to be in ruins; the churches are comparatively empty, and only the few faithful people in Zion seem to care. Here and there around the world people pray for revival, and the most ardent souls yearn for the time when a modern Nehemiah will arise to restore the blessedness to Zion. Alas, the greatest enemy to a spiritual revival is the Church herself. It is problematical whether the Church is ever more untruthful than when she sings enthusiastically-

Like a mighty army

NEHEMIAH ... a man concerned
Moves the Church of God;
Brothers, we are treading
Where the saints have trod.
We are not divided,
All one body we,
One in hope, in doctrine,
One in charity.

The divisions now existing within the Church of God, and even within those sections supposedly evangelical are sufficient to break the heart of God. Melancthon's parable is as applicable today as it was in his own time.

The first recorded prayer of Nehemiah suggests that he had much practise in the noble art of intercession. The pitiable condition of Jerusalem only supplied the sombre setting against which Nehemiah's petitions shone forth as stars. His first prayer was, " I beseech thee, O Lord of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: 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. . . ."

He Prayed for His Life!

Editor M. R. De Haan tells the entrancing story of a British soldier who was caught one night creeping stealthily back to his camp. He had been in some nearby woods, and his actions were sufficient to arouse the gravest suspicion. Paraded before his commanding officer, he was required to explain his movements; and thereupon explained that he had visited the woods in order to pray. That was his only defense. The officer suspected that this was but an excuse for a flagrant violation of camp rules, and growled, " Have you been in the habit of spending hours in private prayer?

" Yes, sir."

"Then down on your knees and pray now," the officer roared; " you never needed to pray as much as you do now."

Expecting immediate death, the soldier knelt and poured out his soul in earnest prayer; and as the officer listened, he recognized reality. This man had surely prayed often; otherwise he could not have become eloquent at a moment's notice. When the prayer was finished, the commander said, " You may go. I believe your story. If you hadn't drilled often, you could not have done so well at review."

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed;
The motion of a hidden fire
That burns within the breast.

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