

Nehemiah

“Then said I unto them, . . . Let us build up the wall of Jerusalem. . . . And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.”

—Nehemiah 2:17,18

as shown earlier in Nebuchadnezzar’s vision.—Dan. 2:31-33,38,39; 8:2-4,20

NEHEMIAH WAS THE SON

of Hachaliah, of the tribe of Judah, and a member of one of the prominent Hebrew families of the Babylonian captivity. The Medes and Persians had conquered Babylon, and now occupied the place as the second universal empire of the Gentile world,

Nehemiah occupied a confidential position with Artaxerxes, the Persian king, somewhat similar to the office held by Mordecai under King Ahasuerus, the father of Artaxerxes. His official title does not give the proper conception of the dignity of his position as “the king’s cupbearer.” (Neh. 1:11) In those days, kings needed to be continually guarded against poisons, which could be easily mingled without detection with their liquid refreshments. Consequently, the cupbearer was one whose loyalty was esteemed irreproachable. They became confidants of royalty and court advisors, and many times occupied the position of Minister of State.

As a confidential officer and counselor to the king, it was Nehemiah's duty to be acquainted with the mood and temper of the people, in order to be able to advise the king of any potential threat to the empire. To this end, it appears to have been his custom to mingle, unrecognized, with the people in the marketplaces, and especially among those of arriving caravans who could tell of conditions in other parts of the realm.

WORD FROM JERUSALEM

Here are Nehemiah's words as recorded in Nehemiah 1:2-4: "Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said unto me, 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. And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven."

From this account it seems apparent that young Nehemiah identified himself very closely with his people and with Jerusalem, even though he had never seen Israel's Holy City. All he knew about its former glory was from nostalgic accounts by his parents and others of the captivity. Yet he was deeply moved and distressed to hear of the devastation and degradation of Jerusalem, so much so that he wept. It is an evidence of his great faith in the God of his fathers, that in his distress he immediately turned to prayer.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

Let us consider some aspects of this beautiful and effectual prayer: "I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments." (Neh. 1:5) The phrase translated "great and terrible" is better rendered "greatly to be revered." It was this proper concept of the supreme majesty of God which Nehemiah had come to appreciate. The rest of verse 5 is nearly a direct quote from Deuteronomy 7:9, and showed Nehemiah's familiarity with the Scriptures.

His prayer continues: "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." (Neh. 1:6) This reference to the ears and eyes of God is not at all presumptuous. It is entirely in harmony with one of the precious promises God has given his people: "The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry." (Psa. 34:15) Solomon, in his prayer made at the dedication of the Temple, said, "Now, my God, let, I beseech thee, thine eyes be open, and let thine ears be [attentive] unto the prayer that is made in this place."—II Chron. 6:40

RECALLING GOD'S PROMISE

Continuing his prayer, Nehemiah made a confession, not only for himself, but for all Israel. He said, "We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor

the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses.” A confession of sin should be a part of every prayer. Then Nehemiah recalled in his prayer certain promises God had made to his people: “Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.”—Neh. 1:7-9

By these words Nehemiah was reminded that Israel’s God was a covenant-keeping God—one who will surely perform what he has promised. Nehemiah in faith claimed this promise. Then he concluded his prayer by specifically referring to the distressed inhabitants of devastated Jerusalem, who desired to return to God and prosper. He said, “Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand. O LORD, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”—vss. 10,11

NEHEMIAH’S PRAYER IS ANSWERED

The answer to Nehemiah’s prayer came suddenly and perhaps unexpectedly. The one referred to in his prayer as “this man” was Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. He had prepared a banquet for his nobles,

at which the queen also was present. We can imagine that the guests were all attired in their best garments, and were joyful to be in the king's presence. Nehemiah, as usual, was at the king's right hand, so that he might taste of the food and wine before it was served to the king. As he served the wine, the king noticed the contrast between Nehemiah and the happy guests. He saw a sadness he had never seen before.

Artaxerxes placed his hand on Nehemiah's arm. The king inquired, "Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart." "Then I was very sore afraid," Nehemiah wrote. (Neh. 2:2) He feared perhaps lest his sadness of heart be misconstrued by the king. It might indicate a spirit of discontent, and loss of interest in his duties—even disloyalty and treachery. In faith, however, Nehemiah quickly recovered his poise.

A COURAGEOUS REQUEST

Nehemiah then realized the king's inquiry might be God's doing, providing just the opportunity he sought. He said to the king, "Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire? Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven." (vss. 3,4) The exact words that he should speak to Artaxerxes now came readily to his lips, as though prompted from above. He continued, "I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send

me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it. And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time." (Neh. 2:5,6) Indeed, it was to be no short time that Nehemiah set. We know from Nehemiah 5:14 that he asked for, and was given, a twelve-year leave of absence from his duties on behalf of the king.

It took great courage for Nehemiah to make his request. The king could easily have considered the rebuilding of the walls and gates of Jerusalem an act of rebellion against his rule—a desire by Nehemiah to set up the nation of Israel as a separate and rival government, with himself as king. When Nehemiah asked for what he did, he laid his life on the line. However, God had answered his prayer—"Grant [me] mercy in the sight of this man."

Nehemiah had faith that his prayer would be answered, although he did not know just how or when. He had planned in advance what he would need for the success of his undertaking if the opportunity presented itself—knowing what he would request of the king. This is evident from the next two verses: "Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah; And a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me."—vss. 7,8

Thus we see that Nehemiah had the necessary materials needed for the work laid out in his mind, showing his full faith that God would somehow direct the matter. This also indicates how closely he had previously questioned his kinsman as to the details of the damage which needed to be repaired. Such foresight, thoroughness, and wisdom were pleasing to God, and also impressed the king, who not only granted Nehemiah's requests, but gave him more than he had asked. Artaxerxes appointed him governor of Judah, and gave him a strong military escort of cavalry, befitting a governor.—Neh. 2:9;5:14

NEHEMIAH BEGINS HIS NEW WORK

A four-month journey brought them to Jerusalem, where Nehemiah was welcomed by the desolate city's inhabitants. Initially, he did not reveal the object of his coming, nor the fact that he had been appointed their governor. To them he was simply a visiting dignitary, a wealthy young Hebrew who had attained high office in the Persian government. This they could see from his military escort, and the richness of his caravan. He wanted to first make a personal appraisal of the situation.

After three days of mingling with the people, and becoming well acquainted with them and their tribal leaders, he secretly made an inspection of the ruined city. He waited until everyone was asleep, and then, on horseback, accompanied by a few trusted servants on foot, he toured the broken walls by moonlight. We read his own words in Nehemiah 2:12-16: "I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had

put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon. And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire. Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass. Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned. And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work."

This moonlight ride was a distressing experience for Nehemiah. If, in the past, he had wept when he had merely heard of the plight of Jerusalem, how overwhelmed he must now have been to see it with his own eyes. However, now he had firsthand knowledge of the facts. What he had seen confirmed the feasibility of his plan for rebuilding. The next morning he called together the elders and prominent representatives of the people and explained the real object of his coming. He showed them his authority from the king of Persia and told them God had heard his prayer, and how wonderfully he had prospered him in this undertaking.

Then he outlined to them a method whereby the repair work could begin immediately. We read his words in Nehemiah 2:17,18: "Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with

fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work."

How quickly Nehemiah was able to inspire the people. He had done so by the example of his own zeal. After the people said "Let us rise up and build," they went to work, and Nehemiah worked with them. He, no doubt, worked with his hands as hard as any of them, carrying stones and heavy timbers, and mixing mortar for the walls.

WHY REBUILD THE WALLS?

The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was considered very important, not merely as a symbol of the city's identity, but also for a very practical reason. With the city walls broken down, the enemies of the Israelites raided and robbed them regularly. They were at the mercy of every nomadic tribe that chanced to come that way. However, if the walls were repaired, it would be a different story. A Bible historian has written concerning the original walled city: "Jerusalem was an almost impregnable Gibraltar. The steep sides of the ravines on the east, the south, and the west provided bulwarks against siege. The north was the only direction from which a foe could attack the city, under the conditions of ancient warfare." No one knows how high the original walls were, or those rebuilt under the leadership of Nehemiah. In A.D. 1542, the leader of the Ottoman empire built the walls which exist today in Jerusalem. They range from twenty to sixty feet high. It

is believed by some that the original walls formed an irregular quadrangle, a little more than four miles in circuit.

In the third chapter of his book, Nehemiah lists fifty families as participating in the building work. This would mean an average of about four hundred and eighty linear feet of wall for each family to repair. It was Nehemiah's plan that each family would work on that portion of the wall nearest its home quarters. This was a wise plan. Each would be especially interested in having the wall strong in his own neighborhood. There would also be a certain degree of proper pride of workmanship—each family making their portion of the wall a monument to their skill and diligent effort.

Through many trials, difficulties and discouragements, the work progressed. Every adverse circumstance was overruled by God, and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, using the original stones, was completed in the incredibly short time of fifty-two days.—Neh. 6:15

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH

Let us now consider some of the valuable lessons to be learned from this account. Although Nehemiah was a very young man, he was held in high esteem by the king as possessing rare ability. This reminds us of Paul's words to Timothy: "Let no one think slightly of you because you are a young man; but in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, be an example for your fellow Christians to imitate." (I Tim. 4:12, *Weymouth*) The younger brothers and sisters of our fellowship should not be underestimated. It must not be presumed that they are immature in

Christ because of their age. This would be a serious mistake. We recall that Stephen, too, was a young man. However, in just a very short period of time he made his calling and election sure. The Lord held Stephen in such high esteem that he was accounted worthy of the honor of being the first to follow in his Master's footsteps even unto death as a martyr.

The fact that Nehemiah was so carefully reared in the faith of his fathers has a lesson for those of us who are the parents of young children. Just as Nehemiah was born in Persia and received his formal education in that heathen nation, our children are subject to the influences of this present evil world. However, these influences can be counteracted by godly parents. Nehemiah's intensity of feeling for the welfare of Jerusalem indicated that this had been accomplished in his case.

Similarly, it is our privilege and duty to teach our children the Truth, and to instill in them a love for the Lord and for his people. As Nehemiah was taught the Hebrew language by his parents, we can teach our children the "language" of the Scriptures. Who knows if God will draw them, and use them for exalted service, as he did with Nehemiah? Let us prepare them for the Master's possible use.

As Nehemiah was in Persia, but was not a Persian, the Christian is in the world, but not of the world. Jesus said of such, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." (John 17:16) No matter what our positions in the world, whether high or low, our primary interest should be the welfare of spiritual Zion. We should have an intensity of feeling for the Gospel message and its service,

praying for opportunities, and being ready to act when the Lord opens the way.

THE ANTITYPICAL CITY WITH BROKEN WALLS

That which particularly distressed Nehemiah was the condition of the walls of Jerusalem. As previously quoted, while in Persia it was reported to him that the walls were broken down and the gates had been burned with fire; and hearing of this condition caused Nehemiah to sit down and weep. Without walls, Jerusalem was no city. It had no cohesion, no integrity, no honor. Enemies could invade, rob and plunder at will. It was a byword and a laughingstock. In Nehemiah's own words, the city and the nation were "a reproach."—Neh. 2:17

The Christian church, as established by our Lord and the apostles, is symbolically referred to as the city of God. Paul says, "Ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven." (Heb. 12:22,23) The primitive church could be likened unto a city that had walls. It had integrity and cohesion. It was held together by a strong faith in the Gospel of Christ, "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." (Jude 3) God's great plan of salvation was understood. As Isaiah 60:18 expressed it prophetically: "Thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise." This "most holy faith" was its protection against the assaults of the Adversary. The walls of sound doctrine kept the church apart and safe.

However, soon after the apostles fell asleep, the walls of spiritual Jerusalem began to be broken down. Paul foresaw this, saying, “I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things.” (Acts 20:29,30) False doctrines and evil practices began to be introduced into the church. Paul’s prophecy of II Timothy 4:3,4 was also fulfilled: “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”

As the great antichrist system developed, the walls of Zion were broken down more and more, until, during the Dark Ages, little remained of the original structure of sound doctrine. Even the great foundation stone of the ransom was lost amid the rubble. Then came the reformation, and some of the walls began to be rebuilt, in spite of great opposition. David’s prayer of Psalm 51:18, echoed by faithful Christians, began to be answered, “Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem.” Truths long lost sight of, were gradually rediscovered, and placed in their proper settings. The work of rebuilding accelerated. Then Christ returned, and by the hand of a “faithful and wise servant” (Matt. 24:45), the structure of sound doctrine was rebuilt to completion. We also must not forget that Nehemiah used the old stones which had been knocked down to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He did not quarry new ones. It was the old, old story—“the faith . . . once delivered unto

the saints”—which was restored for the benefit of spiritual Israel.

There is another meaning to a city with broken-down walls. It is a more personal application, and is given in Proverbs 25:28: “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.” The “spirit” referred to here is the disposition of mind, the thoughts which control our actions. We must rule our thoughts and imaginations, and cast out anything unprofitable to us as New Creatures. Our warfare is in the mind. The New Creature is developed in the mind. The New Creature must use its fleshly mind as its instrument, making it a captive of the new will, the mind of Christ. This is concisely stated by the Apostle Paul: “Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” (II Cor. 10:5) This is not something which is easily accomplished, just as the repairing of stone walls is not easy.

Nehemiah was undoubtedly one of the faithful ones referred to prophetically who will be “princes in all the earth.” (Ps. 45:16) He fits the description which says that they “wrought righteousness, obtained promises, . . . escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, . . . (Of whom the world was not worthy),” and finally “obtained a good report through faith.” (Heb. 11:33-39) Nehemiah’s hope in these future promises of God, based on faith, was shown in his last recorded words—a fitting conclusion to our lesson: “Remember me, O my God, for good.”—Neh. 13:31 ■