

## "NEHEMIAH...WORKMAN ON A WALL"

### INTRODUCTION

The sermons of the past three Sundays have been built around some of the great men of the Old Testament. Cain - Abraham - Jacob - together we have looked into the story of their lives, and here and there along the way we have paused in the margins of the story to draw lessons from their lives, lessons that are amazingly relevant for our own time. We turn again this morning to an Old Testament personality as the basis for the sermon, to the story of Nehemiah.

### NEHEMIAH - THE MAN

Nehemiah is worth knowing and remembering because he, too, is another of God's men who appeared at just the right moment in history to lead his people out of a wilderness in which they were lost.

Nehemiah lived in the fifth century, B. C., and he left us with an autobiography which the historian hails as just about the only accurate picture of what had happened before that time, and since it sets the stage for Nehemiah's entrance, we need to take a moment to review part of it here today.

A century or more before Nehemiah, Nebuchadnezzar had marched into Jerusalem--twice within twelve years - and each time he had carried some of the best and the bravest Jews back to Babylon, leaving Jerusalem a pitiful combination of stones and stragglers. This was the period of the Exile, that dreary stretch when a Psalmist sat down by the waters of Bablon and sobbed, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" But half a century after Nebuchadnezzar had trampled over Jerusalem, a new conqueror appeared on the horizon, Cyrus the Persian, and now mighty Babylon had itself fallen. Cyrus, though, was kinder to the Jewish exiles than was Nebuchadnezzar. He told them that they were welcome to stay in Babylon, without discrimination against them, or that they were free to go home again if they wished.

Nehemiah's parents must have been in the group that decided to stay, for at the point that we meet Nehemiah, he was doing very well for himself in an important post in the Persian Palace. Until one day something happened which was to change his life and change Jerusalem's life as well. He met some residents of Jerusalem and he asked them casually enough perhaps, "Tell me, how are things going in Jerusalem?" And they proceeded to tell him,

"The survivors there in the province who escaped exile are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

Nehemiah couldn't quite get their answer out of his mind. Maybe he had never been to Jerusalem, but he had heard his father talk about its splendor of old - the strength of its walls and the glory of its temple. He had inherited enough of the nation's shame and heartache over its ravishing that when he saw these wandering Jews and heard their tired words about the state of things in Jerusalem, he brooded over the difference between what is and what ought to be. It was God clearly enough who was tapping Nehemiah on the shoulder and slowly but surely bringing his marching orders into focus.

Until one day Nehemiah knew that there was nothing for him to do but to walk in to the King and ask him for a leave of absence to go to Jerusalem to help his people who were there. The King agreed and Nehemiah made his travel arrangements.

It's enough to say that in the days that followed, Nehemiah proved himself to be a brilliant engineer, a rare organizer, and a most effective leader. Little by little that great wall that meant so much to Jerusalem was restored and with it a great deal of the self-respect and strength of the people.

If you're familiar with the book of Nehemiah, you'll perhaps remember some of the problems that they encountered in the restoration both from within the city and from without. Then, in Jerusalem, as now in our country and in our city, there were those who were trying to make an easy dollar at their brother's expense - chiselers, greedy profiteers, dishonest racketeers. No District Attorney or Senate Investigating Committee ever exposed and indicted more clearly. Wrote Nehemiah,

"I was very angry when I heard it. So I said, 'The thing you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies?'"

And then, in Jerusalem, as has been the case in America, there were some grave threats from without. The neighboring provinces stood to gain if Jerusalem remained desolate; they became jealous and jittery when they saw the walls being slowly repaired. So they tried every tactic to sabotage, to discourage, to delay.

One day Nehemiah's enemies sent an invitation to him to meet them in a distant village for a conference, and Nehemiah saw it for what it was - at the least an attempt to delay and dissuade, at the most an opportunity to take his life, and he sent back an answer from the top of the wall where he was working, words which are probably the most frequently quoted words from the entire book,

"I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you...."

I think the proof of Nehemiah's greatness and of God's guidance is simply that he triumphed over both the troubles within and the troubles without. The work on the wall proceeded until it was finished and dedicated. Thereupon Nehemiah was appointed the Governor of the province and for twelve years, with the same integrity and ability, he led in the restoration of that nation that was Israel.

This, in brief, is the story of Nehemiah. In certain respects, he achieved a greatness to which time has simply given greater radiance. There are three things about this man's life that are worthy of our consideration, three things having to do with his human nature that we would do well to incorporate into our lives.

COMPASSION First, you cannot study the life of Nehemiah without being impressed by his great compassion. When he met those travelers from Jerusalem near the palace one morning and asked, "How's everything in Jerusalem?" it would have been far easier for him to have reacted to their discouraging report with a polite, "Is that so? Well, I'm sorry to hear it. And now...if you'll excuse me, I must get back to my royal duties". But NO...this was not his reaction for he tells us in his own words,

"And when I heard those words, I sat down and wept, and mourned for days..."

Have you ever stopped to think about the questions that we ask without any real interest in the answers that we may receive? The most common one, of course, that we may ask in the course of a day's activity is "How are you?" We may ask that question several times a day, and if anyone stops to really tell us how he is, we are apt to frown, fidget and fumble around. We're not really that deeply interested. We all do it.

There have been times in history when that question has been asked and some answers have been given in such a way as to make a profound and lasting impression upon mankind. Florence Nightingale asked that question of sick and wounded soldiers in the Crimean War, and when she heard their answers, she gave herself without reservation to the care and comfort of those soldiers. Or, we think of someone nearer to our own time, Jonas Salk, who asked that question of hundreds of polio victims and when he heard their answers, he gave himself to the search for the vaccine that would make a difference. How much you and I owe to people who have felt the depth of human suffering and who have had this virtue that we call compassion. We have some in this congregation who have it...

Nehemiah had it. He could not forget the plight of his countrymen back in Jerusalem. And so he journeyed to Jerusalem with a caring and a concern that was foreshadowing the caring and the concern of Another who five centuries later was to set "his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem" and in so doing revealed to us the caring and concern that is in the heart of the Eternal, One who made it perfectly clear to us that there is a relation between the dimensions of our caring and our stature as mature Christians. The concern and devotion of our Lord knew no bounds. It went all the way and he never stopped to count the cost. His words were,

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends".

#### PERSISTENCE

In the second place, you cannot read about and study about the life of Nehemiah without being impressed by his great persistence. It's to his eternal credit, to be sure, that in a moment sympathy for his fellow man and sensitivity to God's will that he left the security of the palace position that was his and set out to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. But on the other hand, the account of that unselfish beginning would never have been preserved for us in the Old Testament had it not been followed by his amazing perseverance in getting the job done. Those words that I quoted to you earlier deserve to be remembered... by, those words that he spoke to his enemies who were trying to get him to come down from the wall. "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down!"

It makes us think of some others who got off to a good start in some great work, but who presently did come down and the walls were never finished. We think of Demas, a man whose names appears two or three times in the New Testament, a man who went with Paul on one of his missionary journeys. Demas started out with good intentions and great possibilities, with all of the potential of a Timothy or a Barnabas or a Luke. But he couldn't take it and the only thing that we know about Demas is found in a later reference where Paul tells us that Demas, "in love with the present world...has deserted me". Someone or something called him away and Demas deserted Paul in his great work.

Demas and Nehemiah. Both made fine starts. But then - what a difference. "Demas...deserted me". Another said, "I am doing a great work. I cannot come down".

I think we know ourselves well enough to know whether we're more inclined to be a Demas than we are a Nehemiah. So often we start a new job or a new position with all the glamour that attends a new beginning - enthusiasm, congratulations, good wishes...but then come the headaches and heartaches and the dull routine of the work itself and we wonder who it was and how it came to be that we felt ourselves sold on this job of building a wall. Or we champion a cause and at first - it's exciting! ...but then come the cold days when our enemies gain a foothold, our friends ignore us, and they drop away one by one. We have the urge to come down from the wall rather than stay up there and keep building.

Or, we join a church here in the city and we give ourselves enthusiastically to it all the first couple of years, but then the fun and novelty of it wears off...it's the same old preacher, same old people...the stormy Winter days keep us away or the hot, muggy Sundays of the Summer come. Busy days and more exciting things crowd out our holy habits and good intentions. Our section of the wall is left untended. It happens.

"Blessed" it should be written, "are those who stay behind and keep on building the wall and who echo Nehemiah's words...'we are doing a great work here and we cannot come down!'".

PRAYER We should not close the book of Nehemiah without reflecting that beyond his compassion and persistence, or perhaps one should say before his compassion and persistence, Nehemiah stands out as a man of great prayer. The prayers of Nehemiah could be the basis of a devotional guide - for this man lived very close to God.

Right within the first two chapters of the book Nehemiah reveals two holy habits that have never been improved upon for people who are at all serious about perceiving and practicing the presence of God: first, the unhurried time and place in a day when a person turns up the thermostat of his soul and feels the answering warmth of a power not his own, and second, the little arrow prayers that a person shoots up like darts in the midst of any situation.

When Nehemiah heard the plight of his countrymen, he first retired into a long period of meditation and prayer. His record of the meditations of his heart and the words of his mouth in that time of conversation with God form one of the great prayers of the Bible. But later, when he had come out of his room and stood before the King, about to make his momentous request for a leave of absence to go to Jerusalem, Nehemiah silently prayed for the right word at the right time. This is the sequence in his record: then the King said to me,

"For what do you make this request? So I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the King..."

Such are the little arrow prayers from "where cross the crowded ways of life" that can clear the atmosphere and give guidance and strength. Nehemiah's record of words and deeds is a quiet reminder to us that the whole life of prayer is a continent upon which most of us have gained only a beachhead, and which beckons to further exploration. The prayers of the spiritually great are so different from the "gimme, gimme, gimme" asking that we have sometimes called praying. "Prayer" wrote Studdert-Kennedy, "Does not make millionaires, but it does make men".

CLOSING It is simply part of our commission and our heritage as Christians to pray - and to keep on praying - and thus to become a channel for God's will and his power.

Nehemiah was one of those spiritual "tall men" who never forgot "Whose he was and whom he served".

PRAYER For people of compassion,  
of persistence,  
of prayer,  
we thank thee, O God. May we be persons of  
compassion, persistence and prayer - following the example of  
people like Nehemiah. Let us begin today to following his  
example, in the name and spirit of Christ.