

NEHEMIAH'S FAITH AND WORKS.

NOV. 12. – NEH. 4:7-18.

"**Watch and pray.**" – Matt. 26:41.

NEHEMIAH'S earnest desire to spend himself and his service for the Lord's glory and for the blessing of his people inspired his prayers, and such prayers always bring an answer of some kind: such prayers mean faith and cooperating works. Charles Reade, the converted novelist, briefly sums up the circumstances by which Nehemiah's heart-burden was brought to the favorable attention of the king, as follows: –

"The answer came (1) through an arbitrary, self-willed and passionate king, who a few years before had issued an edict against Jerusalem, and put a stop to the building of its walls. (Ezra 4:8-24.) (2) It came through Nehemiah himself, and the feelings which prompted his prayer. The burden of his spirit and the earnestness of his fasting and praying left their marks on his countenance. Usually he was able to conceal his heart's sorrow (2:1); or during these four months it was the turn of others to serve the king. When he came again before the king the change was apparent, and the king noticed it. 'Why is your countenance sad?' No reply. 'You are not sick?' Still no reply. 'This is sorrow and nothing else.' Then Nehemiah was sore afraid, and I will tell you why. His life was in danger. Even a modern autocrat like Louis XIV. expected everybody's face to shine if he did but appear, and how much more an Artaxerxes. If he had ordered this melancholy visage away to prison or death it would have been justified by precedent."

God gave Nehemiah favor with the king so that he not only was permitted leave of absence to engage in the work which his heart yearned for, but in addition he was appointed Governor of Judea, with letters instructing other governors en route to Jerusalem to grant him

necessary aid, together with a safe military escort. Apparently the preparations for the journey occupied nearly a month, and the journey itself about three months, bringing Nehemiah and his retinue of servants to Jerusalem about July.

It will be remembered that Ezra, in making this journey through a country infested with thieves and brigands, would not ask a military escort from the king lest it should seem a reflection against the divine providential care, of which he had spoken to the king: but Nehemiah, being offered the escort, did not permit any spirit of bravado to hinder his acceptance of it. In both cases we see that the right course was pursued, tho in some respects the conditions were opposites. Spiritual Israelites need to learn both of these lessons – to trust fully in the Lord's provision, be it great or small, and in no case to refuse reasonable safeguards, when under the Lord's providence they are furnished. We remember that one of our Lord's temptations was along this line – to perform a hazardous action for which there was no necessity – to leap from the pinnacle of the Temple. Frequently the Lord's people are beset by the great Adversary to attempt foolish or impossible or unnecessary things, simply to *show their faith*. Such should take a lesson from our Lord's reply in his temptation, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God:" – we are not to tempt divine providence, nor to expect miracles to be wrought on our behalf where the divine arrangement has not made them necessary.

Arrived at Jerusalem, Nehemiah did not at first tell the chiefs of the Jews of his purposes; but secretly, in company with his personal attendants, he took a survey of the condition of the city walls by moonlight for three nights, meanwhile maturing in his mind the plan he was about to suggest. There is a valuable lesson here for spiritual Israelites: how necessary it is that if we desire to do a good work we first thoroughly inform ourselves respecting the needs of the case, so that our course of conduct may be both reasonable and efficient. This is none the less true and important if the walls which need repairing and building are the walls of spiritual Zion, the Church of the living

God, the holy Jerusalem; nor less so if they are the walls of our characters, our own hearts, our own dispositions. We want to take a full survey of [R2526 : page 237] the weaknesses and deficiencies in order to be able, under the Lord's direction and by his assistance, to build up ourselves in the most holy faith, and to similarly build up others of the true Zion. Inspection properly precedes intelligent and profitable reformation of any kind.

Nehemiah did not begin his work by chiding his brethren with unfaithfulness to God or lack of enterprise, etc.; such a course would have further discouraged them, and would have made them feel antagonistic, and perhaps to say, "You will see how it is yourself when you are here a few years," and some would then have taken pleasure in his failure to do more than they had accomplished. Neither did he begin by boastfully saying, "I have come here to do such a work, and within an incredibly short time you will see it accomplished; I will accomplish in days what you have failed to accomplish in as many years." To have taken such a course would have been to arouse the opposition of the very ones without whose aid his mission, humanly speaking, would be sure to be a failure.

Many Christian people can learn a valuable lesson here: the lesson that whoever desires to be a co-worker with God should work in the Lord's way and be guided by the spirit of love – for love does not think unkindly or ungenerously or slightingly of the efforts of others, nor is it boastful. On the contrary, its trust is in the Lord, and its boast therefore must be in him. This lesson is valuable to us also in respect to individual efforts in our own hearts – to build up good characters acceptable in God's sight through Christ Jesus. We are to remember that nothing is gained, but much to be lost, by thinking or feeling boastfully of what we hope to attain in self-control and character-likeness to the Lord: nor is much to be gained by mourning and weeping over misspent opportunities of the past. The proper course is to begin work afresh with confidence, not in ourselves, but in him who called us and who has given such exceeding great and

precious promises. This is our way to success in individual development, and also in our labors upon the walls of Zion, as it was Nehemiah's successful method for the building of the natural, typical Jerusalem.

In answer to his prayer and earnest study, God gave Nehemiah great wisdom and tact in his work, and calling together the chief representatives of the people he laid before them his plans, in which they [R2527 : page 237] were *all* to be associates and partners in whatever blessing and honor might accrue from this service. His plan was to divide the work on the wall so that each person of prominence and capability should have a certain share of the work and the responsibility, as well as of the subsequent honor of success. Moreover, his plan was that each should undertake the building of the wall nearest to his own residence: he would not only be interested in having the work done, but also in having it substantial, (1) because of the credit for the rapid and good workmanship, and (2) because he would be anxious that the wall should be strong in the vicinity of his own home.

There is a lesson here for us: our Lord declares that he gave "to every man [in the Church] his work" (Mark 13:34), represented by his talents, and each should seek to know his talents and to use them, and should not attempt the use of talents not given him, and a work therefore not committed to him. Again, each of us should begin "over against his house:" we, too, should begin our reform work at home.

In our experience in character-building, the same lesson of turning everything to good account may be profitably applied; for instance, if by nature we are quick and impulsive, let us not only seek to restrain such impulsiveness from speaking evil and wrong, but let us exercise it in the speaking of that which is good and profitable for edifying, gradually accustoming ourselves to use this talent in a favorable and not in an unfavorable manner. Have we large combativeness, let us, while seeking to restrain this quality of our

being as respects evil doing and injury to others, learn to exercise it kindly, lovingly, in opposing wrong, "in *contending* earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints." And so with all the so-called baser organs of our fallen, unbalanced condition – they may all be turned to usefulness and helpfulness if but rightly directed by our wills and the spirit of a sound mind – "the mind of the Lord."

The text of our lesson particularly relates to the difficulties and emergencies which arose after Nehemiah had wisely gained the assent and cooperation of the leaders of the people, inspiring them with his enthusiasm – after the work of building the wall had been begun. Then it was that enemies and oppositions began to show themselves. The leaders of the surrounding peoples had for centuries cultivated a hatred of the Jews, (1) on account of their exclusiveness when obedient to the Lord's command; (2) because of their racial differences and animosities, including the differences of their religions; (3) they had all experienced the fact that the Israelites, when under divine favor, were prosperous and capable beyond themselves – the same reason which to-day causes such a hatred of the Jew throughout Europe: (4) like birds of prey, they had been fattening at the expense of the Jews, and this marauding would be interfered with by the rebuilding of the wall and the establishment of a more permanent government in Jerusalem.

Just so it is with individuals who, having learned [R2527 : page 238] the weaknesses of their own characters, resolve by the grace of God to build themselves up along the lines of justice, meekness, patience, love. They immediately find themselves beset with enemies bent on hindering their work for selfish reasons; the lust of the flesh and the eye, and the pride of life, like Philistines, Ammonites and Arabians, take council together against the building up of a character with which they would not be in accord, and which would hinder the exercise of their depraved instincts. Such a uniting of forces, such a conspiracy against the "new creature," is not begun until he begins the work of rectifying, building in his life the wall of righteousness.

Similarly, this illustrates the position of the Lord's people as a Church; so long as they live carelessly, drowsily, inattentive to the doctrinal and the practical bulwarks of Zion, they are not subjected to specific attacks from the great enemy and his deluded servants; but from the time that they realize that in the rubbish pile of human tradition and falsity are to be found gold, silver and precious stones for the erection of the walls of Zion – from the moment that they begin to use the same, and to build according to the original pattern, contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints – from that moment, we say, they are subjected to the conspiracies of the great deceiver and his Philistine and Ishmael hosts – Babylon – and then for the first time every faction and party is ready to conspire and unite against them, wroth, angry, not because injury has been done them, but because the progress of the truth is of itself a rebuke to all who are not of the truth.

Apparently the most zealous of the Israelites resided in Jerusalem, or near it, while others, less zealous, resided in various favorable localities nearer to the Samaritans, etc., and were more or less influenced by their customs, methods and views, and therefore were less in sympathy with the repair work at Jerusalem. These seemingly are referred to as Judah (vs. 10), and expressed their doubts respecting the prosperity of the work, saying that it was useless to attempt so great a work because of the amount of rubbish requiring to be handled and disposed of, both to make ready for the work on the foundations and also to secure the suitable building stones. These early proclaimed that the laborers would soon weary of their task, and the builders be forced to suspend the work. They were not enemies of the Jews, and are not here classed as their adversaries, but they were lacking in faith, and hence were hindrances to the work by reason of their discouraging suggestions. Just so in the individual case, where reforms and character-building are commenced, he finds in himself various disheartening suggestions respecting the difficulties and impossibility of the work he is undertaking. These must be resisted. Similarly, in the work of Zion, in building up the waste places, reassembling the stones

of precious truth from the rubbish-heaps of sectarianism: there are those who are in sympathy with the apostolic teachings who nevertheless clearly discourage the builders, and are thus, without intending it, to a considerable extent adversaries of the work.

As for the open adversaries, their first attempt was to stop the work with ridicule (2:19; 4:1-3), "Even that which they build, if a fox go up he shall even break down their stone walls." Sarcasm is one of the most successful of our Adversary's weapons, and with it he slays many and hinders many from progress in the work of building their own characters and from the work of building upon the walls of the true Zion: but the faithful are not to be disconcerted by scorn or ridicule or irony; they build on and their Adversary becomes the more aggressive as he finds that he cannot stop them with ridicule. So it was with these open adversaries of Nehemiah and his faithful co-workers. They planned a sudden assault by which they would take the builders unawares, and by killing off some of their leaders would stop the work.

The people of Judah who did not favor the building and who lived amongst the Samaritans, etc., learned of this conspiracy, and having a brotherly interest in the builders, sent them word, apparently advising them to desist from the work lest it would bring against them the destruction contemplated. But the builders were not to be thus intimidated, and instead of stopping the work they armed themselves for defence, Nehemiah setting bodies of men upon the eminences behind the lowest parts of the unfinished walls, the points where the attack would most likely be made, and where their enemies would most surely see them ready for defence. But finding them forewarned and forearmed, the projected attack was abandoned.

Just so it is with the individual: when he cannot be dissuaded from his work of character-building by sneers and sarcasm, the attempt is made to vanquish him before he has gone far in his reformatory work. He is attacked along the lines of his weaknesses by the great Adversary, and finds necessity for the armor of the Lord, the shield of

faith, the sword of the spirit, the helmet of salvation, etc., that he may withstand the attacks from the fiery darts of the wicked one. And just so it is with the Lord's people as they unite together for the study of his Word, as he has counseled them – "forgetting not the assembling of themselves." The Adversary will attack them as a little company, endeavor to frustrate the object of their assembling, endeavor to dishearten them before they have made much progress in the knowledge and practice of the **[R2527 : page 239]** truth. But if they will only go to the armory they will find that the Captain of our salvation has made abundant provision that we should not be helpless in the hands of our Adversary, for, as the Apostle declares, "we are not ignorant of his devices." And here it is well to remember what proved so helpful to Nehemiah and his faithful little band, of which he says, "We made a prayer unto God and set a watch against them day and night." This is our Captain's instruction to the Christian soldier, "Watch and pray." Let us not forget either of these important prerequisites to safety and victory. – Eph. 6:10-17; Heb. 10:25; 2 Cor. 2:11.

Not only did Nehemiah see to the arming and preparation of his band, but additionally he stimulated their faith, saying, "Be not afraid of them: remember the Lord, who is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren," etc. We are to remember, as soldiers of the cross, that our Captain has instructed us that to be full of faith, full of good courage in our reliance upon him, is a matter of primary importance in respect to our work and victory. His word is, "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even your faith." In our battle against sin and everything that would hinder the work to which the Lord has called us, and to which we have consecrated ourselves, we fight for the new creature, not for the old; yea, we expect to lay down the old nature in death, and already we reckon **[R2528 : page 239]** it dead, and put forth all of our efforts on behalf of the new creature. And similarly our brethren for whom we are fighting are contending earnestly for their deliverance from the thralldom of sin and of error – these brethren are also new creatures, brethren of Christ, sons of God; and the Apostle

exhorts us, saying, "We ought also to lay down our lives for the brethren." – 1 John 3:16.

As is often the case, the preparation for the conflict was all that hindered it; and so with the Lord's people, those who most carefully prepare themselves with the armor of God are much less frequently attacked than those who neglect the armament.

Thenceforth, not only Nehemiah's servants, but all the people, seem to have maintained their armament, while they prosecuted their work, and so must the Christian Church and Christian as an individual maintain their defensive armor and keep watch against the Adversary while seeking to build up themselves and others in the most holy faith. Our faith and our works must cooperate to bring the desired success, and as success attended Nehemiah's efforts and that of his coadjutors, so success is *sure* to come to all of the Lord's people who follow this prescribed course. "If ye do these things ye shall never fall, but so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." – 2 Pet. 1:4-11.
