

[R3674 : page 360]

NEHEMIAH'S FAITH AND WORKS.

– NEHEMIAH 4:7-20. – *DECEMBER 3.* –

Golden Text: – "Watch and pray." – Matthew 26:41.

IN a previous lesson we noted the devotion of Nehemiah, and his prayers to the Lord that he might be used in connection with the establishment, the rebuilding at Jerusalem and the encouragement of the faithful who had returned to Palestine from the Babylonian captivity. To-day's lesson gives us a glimpse of this noble man working and encouraging others to work along the lines of his faith and the Lord's promises.

The Persian king, Artaxerxes, favored the proposition of his confidential servant, Nehemiah, and granted him an armed escort and royal authority in connection with the project close to his heart. Thus far the Lord had favored him, and a three months' journey brought him to the city where centered his hopes and the hopes of his nation, because in it centered the divine promise. In all this we see an exhibit of faith in active operation – faith with works, as the Apostle enjoins. It will be remembered [R3674 : page 361] that Ezra, when starting on his expedition, although he probably took much more treasure, had no armed escort from the king. In this case, Nehemiah, with no less faith in the Lord, had the armed escort.

The reason for the difference of procedure is stated: it was not wrong for Nehemiah to use available means for the protection of his life and the property under his care, which was to be used in the Lord's service, just as it is not wrong for the Lord's people of to-day, while fully trusting in him, to insure their property against loss by fire. It does not imply a lack of confidence in God to use every reasonable and proper means for the preservation of life and health and property. We remember how our Lord resisted the temptation of Satan, and would not leap from the Temple pinnacle into the

valley below – he would not thus tempt God and the providential care in which he trusted. Had he been cast headlong by his enemies while in the dispatch of duty the matter would have been different, and undoubtedly his life would have been miraculously preserved, because his hour had not yet come. There is a lesson for us in all these matters: our faith in the Lord should not lead us to expect him to do for us those things which we are able to accomplish for ourselves.

"BE YE WISE AS SERPENTS."

On his arrival at Jerusalem Nehemiah did not reveal his plans. The people merely knew that a Jew high in favor with the King, an officer of his household, with a small retinue of servants, was in their midst. Had he told his plans the enemies of the city would soon have heard of them and have taken steps to interfere; besides, the course followed was a much better one for the awakening of the interest and co-operation of the people. Many of the Lord's people need to learn this lesson of secretiveness – not to tell everything that they know. Our Lord not only exhorted us to be as wise as serpents while harmless as doves, but through the Apostle also he exhorts that we should be swift to hear and slow to speak – not too ready to tell all of our plans and arrangements, etc. We even know of some of the Lord's consecrated people who have gotten the wrong impression that to secrete any matter, to avoid telling all that one knows, to avoid giving full answers that would reveal all that is asked, would be considered by some as sinful, deceptive. It is well for them to have their conscience, but conscience requires training, and **[R3675 : page 361]** the safest instruction comes from the words and example of our Lord and his apostles.

Our Lord used this very method of not telling all that he knew to those who were not ready for the information. He said on one occasion to his disciples, "I have many things to tell you but ye cannot bear them now." (John 16:12.) When asked questions by his

enemies who sought to entrap him he avoided answering them or gave them evasive answers. In all this he was as wise as a serpent, yet harmless as a dove. He did not refrain from telling that which was really proper to be told, necessary to the comfort or advantage of his questioner. The Apostle Paul quotes his enemies as charging him with guile – "Being crafty I took you by guile." (2 Cor. 12:16.) An evil mind can indeed put an evil construction upon the noblest words and deeds. This was true in the Master's case also. The Apostle exercised wisdom in his method of dealing with those whom he desired to bless, hiding from them for a time truths which at first they were not prepared to receive or appreciate, but afterward, when necessary to them, he made plain, assuring us that he had not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God. (Acts 20:27.) Strong meat for men and milk for babes is the thought. Let us more and more seek to exercise heavenly wisdom in all our affairs, that we may accomplish as much good as possible and choke and stumble none.

"A MIND FOR THE WORK."

Nehemiah was a man of action: he had come to Jerusalem for a purpose and wasted no time. He arose by night, took with him some of his trusted servants, and made a thorough inspection of the wall all around the city, probably by moonlight, and then he promulgated his plan for doing a great work speedily. As a matter of fact, the entire wall was reared in fifty-two days. How could he have possibly accomplished so much in so short a time? The answer is that the people had a mind to work – their hearts were in the work, they labored not as eye-servants nor as men-pleasers merely, but labored as for the Lord and for his cause. The method employed by Nehemiah shows not only that he prayed and labored but that he planned. His project was to divide up the work of the wall amongst various parties: for instance, the priests and Levites and their families undertook a section, various of the notable families undertook sections, guilds and societies undertook sections, until the

whole work was parceled out and each party was pledged for his share in the service. The people entered into the matter spiritedly, each anxious not only to see the whole wall built, but anxious that his own share in it should be substantially done, a credit to himself as well as to the city in general.

There was tact in this: it was the endeavor to make use of the natural tendencies of the human mind. It would be well for all of the Lord's people, charged with the building of the wall of righteousness which surrounds the people of God, separates them from the world, to likewise encourage and stimulate one another in the work which all have at heart. To make a practical illustration of this to our own time and work in this harvest of the Gospel age, we see that there is an abundance of labor for all who have a mind to work. Some can engage in the colporteur service – many are so engaged, much to their own spiritual advantage as well as to the profit of those to whom they minister the Truth, and to the general upbuilding of the wall of righteousness and to the separation of the Lord's people from those who are without, the world. Others can labor as pilgrims and find plenty to do; still others as volunteers can serve the cause by word of mouth, by pen and by the printed page, distributing tracts and in general co-laboring with the Lord and with the brethren in the building of the wall of Zion. Those who are in any measure or degree successful have a mind for the work, otherwise the harvest work would not progress as it does – the Lord would find some other way of accomplishing results now due to be obtained.

"BE NOT WEARY IN WELLDOING."

The work started with great energy and zeal, but was not long in encountering the opposition described in our lesson. Sanballat was a governor of the Samaritans, [R3675 : page 362] a mixed people partly of Jewish and partly of heathen blood; Tobiah was the governor of the Ammonites, across the river Jordan; the Arabs of the desert as well as the people of Ashdod, a Philistine city in the

South, heard of the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem and were opposed to it for several reasons: the fortification of that city meant an increase of Jewish power and a proportionate decrease of their own influence. They remembered how the city had once been great and influential, and selfishness prompted opposition to it. Besides, religion was the factor with all these peoples. Each had his own religious party and creed, and the success of the Jews in Jerusalem meant the triumph of the God of the Jews and a corresponding lessening of influence of those who differed. Furthermore, the Jews scattered amongst these various peoples and gradually becoming amalgamated with them would be more likely to be drawn back to Judaism if its capital were again a stronghold and the nation seeming to rise more completely from the dust.

As these enemies of the Jews were wroth without a proper reason, from selfish motives, so those who are engaged in the harvest work, in the rebuilding of the walls of Zion, in the replacing of the doctrines of righteousness and truth, overthrown by the Adversary during the dark ages, find opposition not only from the world, the flesh and the devil, but chiefly from the Sanballat followers of nominal Christianity – the "mixed peoples" who have a form of godliness without its power. All of these opposing influences are ready to combine to hinder the reestablishment of the truths and principles which properly separate the Lord's consecrated people from all others. Various are the schemes and hindrances devised.

In Nehemiah's time the opposition first took the form of sarcasm and ridicule, saying that the wall they were building was not scientifically done, would not stand the tests of "higher criticism;" and a fox even brushing against it would be liable to throw it down. Those who to-day are building upon the wall of Zion, each in his own place, according to his own opportunity, must be prepared for similar sarcasm. Who are you? What are you? What can you hope to accomplish? Look at Romanism, look at

Methodism, look at Presbyterianism, look at all the wealth and learning represented by the various denominations of Christendom! What can you hope to accomplish by the rebuilding of the walls of Zion? Those who are easily put to shame and who give up the work of building evidence thereby that they have not the faith which would be pleasing to the Lord if they withdraw in spite of all we can do to encourage them. We must let them go, although by and by they will regret such a course.

"FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH."

When the enemies of the Jews found that sarcasm availed nothing, and that the building of the wall progressed with considerable speed, they secretly took counsel to make an attack on the city, to break down the walls and to discourage the builders. However, in the Lord's providence some of those who were building had come in from the surrounding country anxious to have a part in the work; and the secret messages for these to return home because of an attack about to be made reached the ears of Nehemiah, who forthwith armed the people so that they would be ready to repel an attack at any time. The hodcarriers were armed, and those who did the mason work had swords at their sides, while Nehemiah's special guard, divided into two parts, relieved each other at labor and at military service. Thus the work progressed under serious difficulties, which demonstrated all the more that love and zeal were behind the movement.

Thus it must be to-day with all who are laboring in the harvest work – each one needs to be armed: not, however, with carnal weapons. "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds," (of error). (2 Cor. 10:4.) All of those laboring to-day upon the walls of Zion need to be equipped with the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the sandals of patient endurance, the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit. Whoever is not armed is in danger of

being overcome by the Adversary. The sword of the Spirit as well as the shield of faith are necessary every moment. When we are opposed we must be able, as the Apostle Peter enjoins, to so use the sword of the Spirit as to be able to give to every man that asketh us a reason for the hope that is in us, with meekness and reverence, from the Word of God. Our warfare has reached this stage at the present time, our enemies no longer ridicule as at first. Let each who is a servant of the Lord and has consecrated his life to his service be on the alert continually. Greater is he who is on our part than all they that be against us.

Finding that the Jews could not be taken unawares, Sanballat and his associates tried another scheme; they invited Nehemiah to a conference, but that wise man refused to confer, and sent them word that his work was great and urgent, and that he must build the wall. Doubtless our opponents now would like to draw our attention away from the particular work we have to do; they would like to have us discuss with them other projects, other reforms, social, political, federations, etc. But we cannot join in any of these; we have a work to do, the Lord's work; there are few to do it and it requires all of our time and energy.

The next step of the Adversary was to threaten Nehemiah. This they did indirectly, not directly. They got a certain man to pose as a prophet of the Lord and to prophesy injury to Nehemiah, and to advise him to hide himself in the sacred precincts of the Temple. The thought evidently was that, if the leader of the **[R3676 : page 362]** movement could be affrighted and drawn from the work, the others would soon be discouraged and the whole matter would fizzle out; but Nehemiah was certainly a chosen vessel of the Lord for this very service, and could not be thus frightened. May it be so with us; may our confidence in the Lord be such that the fear of man will not be a snare to us.

"FIGHTING WITHOUT AND FOES WITHIN."

While the outer foes were thus seeking to hinder the work, other matters tended to discourage the workers: (1) The supply of stones for the wall began to be more difficult to secure; as the top and loose ones were used the others required to be more or less dug out; (2) as the wall grew higher it made slower progress and required greater effort to carry the materials onto it; (3) the burden and heat of the day sapped the strength of the laborers and they needed the encouragements which Nehemiah continually gave them, that the Lord was on their part, that their prayers were heard, [R3676 : page 363] and that they should not be afraid of their enemies, but remember the Lord which is great and terrible. It is so with us, the Lord's followers who are to-day building the walls of Zion. At first we felt so glad to be rid of the tormenting errors of the dark ages, so glad to be free, so glad to know something of the Divine Plan of the Ages, we built hard and fast. But with the outward opposition came also greater labors as we strove for mastery ourselves and to build one another up in the most holy faith.

How many spiritual Israelites of this "Harvest Time," who began with great courage and zeal, and shoutings of joy, have become more or less disheartened. But not all. By the Lord's grace there are encouragements and stimulations for the laborers on the walls of Zion still. The pilgrim visits, the one-day Conventions, the general Conventions, together with the regular visits of the WATCH TOWER and the growing numbers and volumes of DAWN, have served to encourage and stimulate the Lord's faithful, and we are still going on from grace to grace, from knowledge to knowledge, and still trusting in him who is the Captain of our Salvation.

"WE THAT ARE STRONG OUGHT TO BEAR WITH THE INFIRMITIES OF THE WEAK."

Another difficulty arose: Nehemiah found that some of those who labored on the wall, full of zeal for the cause, were made to

suffer for their faithfulness by the wealthy Jews. The poorer ones getting behind in their rents, taxes, etc., were scarcely able to provide for their families; and their richer brethren, taking advantage of their destitution, had made hard contracts with them, taking away their small possessions, etc., in payment for debts which they were unable to pay because of their engagement in the Lord's service. Nehemiah was righteously indignant with this condition, and called the offenders and stated the matter before them plainly and clearly, and shaking out the flowing folds of his outer garment he declared that thus the Lord would shake out from amongst his people any who had such a selfish spirit.

We are glad that this condition of things finds no parallel amongst us at the present time. On the contrary, we find that love of the brethren is one of the marked evidences of growth in grace and knowledge. Amongst the assemblies of the Lord's people we find a general tendency not only to avoid asking the poorer brethren and sisters to contribute to the expenses, but a willingness to do what each can for the assistance of the needy ones. At our conventions, where no collections are taken up, there is a forwardness to see that none of the entertaining Church are overburdened with expense, and also that any in attendance at a convention who are not well to do in this world's goods shall not suffer for necessities and some of the comforts of life. May these evidences of true brotherhood in the body of Christ and of the true building of the walls of Zion continue and abound with us until the work is finished, until our Master shall say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

ONE TRUMPET-VOICE DIRECTS US ALL.

The last verse of our lesson tells of the arrangement made whereby the various workers on the different parts of the great wall could be summoned by Nehemiah to one place if necessity required. The summons was the sound of the trumpet – "In whatsoever place

ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us. Our God shall fight for us." Is it not the same with us to-day? It is not the voice of man that gathers us but the voice of the trumpet – the voice of the great trumpet, the seventh trumpet, announcing our Redeemer as the Captain of our Salvation, present, gathering together his saints unto him, making up his jewels, and shortly to establish them with himself in Kingdom glory, in the control of the whole world for its blessing and uplifting, for the destruction of all who wilfully and intelligently oppose him.

