# Lecture on the Book of Nehemiah

William Kelly

Public domain. As published on plymouthbrethren.org.

Also online at https://plymouthbrethren.org/article/3252

KEE Ministry Library · Faithful Men
kee-ministry-library.netlify.app

# Lecture on the Book of Nehemiah

## Nehemiah 1

The book we enter upon tonight gives us the last view of the people of God in the Old Testament as far as their history is concerned; hence, it has a very deep interest for us. It is the last time for the Jew; as we are now called out in the last time for God's people here below. That last time for us began, as we know, before the last apostle was taken away, that God might give us distinctive, definite, divine instruction; not merely a sober and sound judgment drawn from Scripture, but that the Holy Ghost might be able to tell us distinctly that it is the last time. Thus we may see most clearly the strong analogy on the surface of it between the words that were spoken about Israel in those days and the position which the goodness of God has given to us now. I do not say this to set our imagination at work, but that we may gather the instruction which the Holy Ghost has given us — that which He tells us of the remnant that had returned, and of their state.

There is a considerable difference in the tone between the Book of Ezra and that of Nehemiah. Ezra shows us the remnant returning from Babylon and first gathering together in Jerusalem — in the land. The Book of Nehemiah shows us the same remnant at a later epoch — the last that Scripture shows us historically. Malachi, no doubt, falls in with Nehemiah, just as Zechariah and Haggai move with Ezra. Haggai and Zechariah were some time before Malachi. These will enable us, therefore, to connect the prophecy of these books of Scripture with the history.

But the first thing I wish to advert to, as a matter of practical profit for our own souls, is this — the spirit which imbues all the conduct of Nehemiah. He was the instrument that God formed for His own glory in the circumstances that now come before us. We shall find that there is a peculiar propriety in this book, without in the least wishing to affirm that all that Nehemiah did or said was according to God's mind and thoughts. Not so. After all, he was but a man — a man of God, but a man. Still, that the Holy Ghost wrought powerfully by thus man, and that what was wrought for God's own glory then is communicated to us for our profit now — who would deny?

What, then, is the first great and marked feature? What is the great moral trait that characterises Nehemiah? We shall find it, not only at the beginning, but all through, from first to last. It is, I venture to say, a deep and constant sense of the ruined state of God's people. Nothing more important for us! It does not at all follow that, because we who live in this day are the Lord's, we possess this feeling any more than did they because they were really Israelites. They were Israelites just as truly as Nehemiah, but who entered most imperfectly into the mind of God about the state of His people. Yet it is evident that such a primary judgment affects the whole course of our service, of our prayers, of our worship. We are either in communion with God — I do not mean about ourselves, but about His people — or we are not. If we are working with one thought and God with another — if we cherish one field, and God, on the contrary, has a little different one — it is evident that whatever may be the goodness of God in maintaining us, there, nevertheless, must be a divergence from His

affections, as well as from that sound judgment which ought to be found in the child of God; for, very evidently, all that is true and holy and good and for God's glory depends upon our being in the current of God's mind and work. Nehemiah was, and Nehemiah had to be, content with but a scanty portion of the remnant. This is a sorrowful feeling, but we must always face the truth. This did not make Nehemiah slight the remnant. His reason for regarding them with peculiar affection, whether they were walking well or walking ill, was that they were God's people.

They had lost the title now, and this is a very important thing to bear in mind. As a people, what God had written upon them now was not merely Ichabod: the glory had departed long, long before. The glory had departed when the ark was taken by the Philistines; but they had been taken themselves and carried down, not merely into Philistia, but into Babylon. The great power that symbolises idolatry had carried them captive. A remnant was returned, but little had they learned the lesson of God. Outwardly they had, no doubt, profited by it. We never find them returning to idolatry after this; still, they had very little sense of the glory of God which they had lost. Now, this was what characterises Nehemiah. There are two things, beloved brethren, and if there be a failure in either, there is the greatest loss for the soul. One is to hold fast, on the one hand, the greatness of the ruin, and the other is to hold fast, on the other hand, the faithfulness of God, spite of that ruin. These were found, and they were found together in Nehemiah. The Lord grant that they may be found in us! We need both, and we never can be really answering to what God looks for

from us unless we enter into both in communion with Him, and are enabled to hold fast both.

Now, there are many things that tend to make us forget. Supposing we are brought together in the name of the Lord, and He gives us a marked flow of the sense of His presence: we are in danger of forgetting the ruined state of the church. We begin to be, not merely thankful, which is always right, but we begin to be satisfied. With what? No doubt, it appears to be with the grace of God towards us. Yes, but we are in danger of actually being satisfied with ourselves. We are happy: quite right, but do we still carry the sense of ruin? Is it not a grief and a burden — the scattering of the members of Christ — the deep desolation of all that bears His name — everything that is done throughout this wide world against the Lord? What is that object upon our hearts? What the Pope is about? What Protestants are about? What is done by everything that bears the name of the Lord Jesus? Why, have we got anything to do with that? We ought to have — I will not say something to do with it, but we ought to feel much about it. We ought to be burdened by whatever tarnishes the glory of the Lord Jesus; and, therefore, the moment we sever ourselves in heart from that which bears the name of the Lord Jesus upon earth. and settle ourselves down in the comfort and in the enjoyed presence of the Lord, we are altogether wrong in the most fundamental principle of God as to that which befits us in the present state of the church of God.

See how Nehemiah feels. Personally, he was surrounded by every kind of comfort. It was a sorry exchange, as far as that went, to abandon the court of the great king and to go into all the desolations of the land and of

Jerusalem; and, after all, it might be easily a matter of reasoning to him, ‘Why should I trouble myself about Judæa? It was because of our sins that we were driven out, and it is evident that the people who are there are altogether unworthy. They are behaving themselves without a thought or care for the glory of God. Why should I trouble myself about it? Has not God said, “Not my people”? Has He not taken away all that place of honour in which we were once? Why should I trouble myself more about it? It is all done with. It is no good to think of the people of God. It is only a question of the soul individually. All I have to do is to serve the Lord where I am.’ So he might have reasoned. No doubt whatever, Nehemiah was a pious man, and he was in a place, too, where he might have enjoyed his piety. He does not seem to have been under any restraint. He was evidently respected and valued by the great king. He was in a position of high responsibility, for you must not confound the place of a servant in modern days with that which was enjoyed by Nehemiah here.

The cup-bearer, in those days, was one who stood in nearest intimacy to the king, and, more, particularly, to the king of Persia. You are aware that they made themselves extremely little before the eyes of their servants. As to their people — their subjects — they did not allow them to see them except on comparatively rare occasions. This grew up more and more among them, and it was always, through the jealousy and fear of men, a very responsible position, because the way that many of the subjects retaliated upon the haughtiness and pride of these kings was by forsaking their masters and getting rid of them. The cup-bearer, therefore, was one that stood in one of the most delicate and responsible

positions in the empire. He was one who had the life of the king more particularly under his command — if I may say so — and he who is in this position was, practically, in a place of most intimate relationship to the king — a sort of vizier or prime minister to the king, to a certain extent. Nehemiah had the king's confidence, as we can clearly see, and was not interfered with as to his conscience, but his heart was with the people of God.

He reminds us, in this closing book, of that which we find near the beginning of the history of God's people. Moses, the leader of the people out of Egypt, had just the very same feeling for the people of God. Providentially delivered brought into the house of Pharaoh's daughter, with the very brightest prospects, why should not he use them? Why should not he wait and employ his influence to bring the people out? Why should not he release them from their burdens gradually? Had he put it to the vote of Israel, I cannot doubt that they would have come to that conclusion. They would have said that no way would have been so excellent, so wise, so prudent as for Moses just to wait a little. He had, at that time, one foot, you may say, upon the throne. It would have been comparatively easy for him, for we do not hear of Pharaoh's son: we hear of Pharaoh's daughter. He could have easily gained that position which his genius would naturally entitle him to. Changes of dynasty were always very easily made in the Eastern world in ancient times, so that nothing would have seemed, therefore, a more providential opening than what God had given to Moses. But no; he loved the people, and, what was more than that, he loved God. He had the sense of what God's glory was, and a sense that

God must act according to His own glory, and that there was no other way of blessing the people.

So now Nehemiah — as Moses at the beginning so he at the end of the history — the one before they were formed into a people — the other after. “Not my people,” was written upon them — the same spirit, though in totally different circumstances. And so his heart was filled with grief. It was nothing personal; it was purely the grief of love, but it was the grief of love according to God. It was the love of the people because they were His people, even though God had blotted out their title. Still, there was the fact, and he knew right well that although God had cast off the people for a season it was not for ever, and that the title of “My people” will shine in Israel more brilliantly than ever when the Messiah takes them up again — when they turn in heart and repent before Him, and He vindicates and delivers them.

Nehemiah, then, loved the people of God at the very time when they had lost their title — when they were being chastised for their grievous faults and sins against God — at a time when it seemed, for example, the most reasonable thing to give them up. Had not God given them up? Why, then, should Nehemiah feel so much about them? Why should he pine about a people that were so utterly unworthy? That was not the least a question for him. He knew that there was upon earth only the remnant of that people, most guilty and most justly punished, but, nevertheless, the people of God, with whom God’s plans of blessing and grace for the earth are bound up. He knew that there, and there only, was the Messiah to be born — that there the Christ was to come among that people and in that land. His heart,

therefore, turns to Jerusalem. It might be in ruin, and it was; but there his heart turns.

Now, I should like to ask, beloved friends, whether that is the case with us, for the church of God is more to God than ever Israel was; and not more truly was Israel a people that had lost their place, than the church now is as an outward thing here below. The guilt of Christendom, I have no hesitation in saying, is worse than that of Israel. Incomparably more blest, it is incomparably more guilty, for the guilt is always in proportion to the mercies perverted or abused. Nevertheless, I dare to say that we ought to love the church, not merely the gospel, or the Lord, only; but, if we enter into the feelings of Christ, we shall know that Christ loves the church; and, therefore, to merely satisfy ourselves with the mercies which the Lord shows us would be just like Nehemiah blessing God for what he enjoyed in the palace of the great king, and being content to be without a thought and without a care and without a tear and without a prayer for the people of God. But not so. All his heart, as far as objects upon earth were concerned, was set upon them, and his grief was because of the way in which that people of God was now falling short of what was due to His glory here below. Hence, therefore, we see his weeping and mourning. “I sat down,” as he says; “and mourned certain days and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven.” And he pours out his heart to Him, and he confesses, and confesses, too, in a way which shows that there was no self-righteousness about it. He includes himself. “We have sinned against Thee, both I and my father’s house have sinned.” There is no isolation of his spirit from this confession of the failure. He feels his

own part, and so much the more because he was faithful, for it is never persons who are most guilty that are most ready to confess. It is when you are out of the guilt of the sin that you can the more thoroughly confess the sin before God. While you are still under the darkness and cloud of it, you are not in a spirit of confession; but when the grace of God has lifted your head above it, shining upon you from above, then indeed you can confess thoroughly to God. Now Nehemiah could thus feel. We can easily see from his general spirit that, by the grace of God, he was a man walking with the Lord, and could feel things clearly, and could feel things rightly, and his heart was free to occupy itself about God's people. So he owns their failure, their departure, their utter dishonour; but he cries to God.

## Nehemiah 2

The king, as we learn from the second chapter, finds Nehemiah's countenance sad, and at once remarks about it. It was not a thing that these kings relished. Humanly speaking, a man coming specially to such a position would seem to have but small respect for the monarch, for, naturally, these great kings cherished the idea that whatever was sorrowful was quite unfit for their presence. Even supposing a man were ever so sad, still, there ought to be sufficient light and glory in their presence to banish all such sad thoughts; but the truth is that had it been merely for outward casualties — for the loss of substance or any natural thing here below — Nehemiah's tears and gloom would have all disappeared in the presence of the Lord, but the presence of the Lord deepened these. The more he went before God and weighed the state of the Jews in Jerusalem, the more

grieved he was. It was not that his heart was not lifted up, but for all that the tears would naturally flow the faster. The deep sense of it would be felt just the same, because he felt what a God was theirs, and what they had been to God — what they were now to God! Nehemiah, therefore, was in no way delivered from sadness by his prayer. And this is what I wish to show. There was confidence in going to God, but, at the same time, there was still the deep sense of the ruin.

The king, however, puts the question, and we find that Nehemiah candidly tells us how much afraid he was, for, indeed, it might have cost him his life. The king might have suspected treason — might have suspected that there was some dark plot — and that Nehemiah's conscience was at work. All sorts of things might have entered his mind in accounting for this extraordinary gloom that covered his servant's face. But Nehemiah tells the simple truth to him. "Why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, and the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?" (Neh. 2:3)

Perhaps it is worth noticing, but I only notice it to shew what a difference there is between the word of God and the word of man. In the book of Maccabees, Nehemiah is said to be a priest, and also, singular to say, of the race of David. Now, whatever may be the case as to the race of David, for that very reason he could not be one of the priests. I mention it that we may see how men, when once they attempt to write upon the things of God, only expose their ignorance. Yet this is a book, as you know, that professes to be inspired — at least, it is accepted by a large portion of Christendom as such. Very possibly Nehemiah did belong to the tribe of Judah. It would

seem that if Jerusalem were the place of his fathers' sepulchres, so it would be. It was there that they were buried very generally; but he was not a priest. This is a mistake. He was a civil governor; and this leads me to a very important point, as to this book. The temple is not the point, but the ordinary life of the people of God. And, let me say, beloved brethren, that this is of great moment for you and for me in this our day.

Christianity is not merely a thing of God's worship: Christianity is meant to govern every day. I do not like your Sunday Christians, I do not like men or women who merely just maintain their place by coming to the table of the Lord. This is disgraceful. We are called, assuredly, to recognize His claims for every day, and so much the more because there may be difficulties. In a busy place such as we know is in our immediate neighbourhood, many of us have our duties, though not all the same. Some of us have labours. Some of us may know what it is to labour early and late. Some of us may know what it is to labour by night as well as by day. And this is not confined to men, but applies to women, for there are those who work, and work hard and diligently; and I know not what we are here for except to be diligent in whatever may be before us. But I still say that it is a sorrowful thing to be diligent for the world, and not for the Lord, and that we are bound to take care that our ordinary life of every day be a witness of Christ. I do not say that we are all called to do the same work, but I do say that we are all called to the same Christianity, and we are all called that Christ should be apparent in what we are doing every day, and not merely upon the Lord's day, or the Lord's day morning. No, beloved brethren, this will not do for the Lord, and the failure to be thus

witnessing for the Lord Jesus in our ways of every day, and in our ordinary matters, our ordinary life, our social life, our life of labour, of whatever kind it may be, is a blotting-out of the grand object for which we are called by the grace of God.

In short, while Ezra bears upon what is more manifestly the spiritual part — that which pertains to the worship of the Lord and the altar, and while the temple — the house of God — is the grand point there, we have here in Nehemiah the wall of Jerusalem; not the temple, but Jerusalem. Here we have, not the house built, but the wall built. It is the desolation, therefore, of what pertained to the people every day. It is what concerned their ordinary life, and, for this simple reason, that the people of God are always called to what is, if I may say so, extraordinary — at any rate, to what is divine. It may be the commonest thing in the world, but we ought to do no common thing except in a divine way. Whatever we do — whether we eat or drink — we ought to do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, to do all to the glory of God. This is our calling. This is what the Jews had forgotten. They had no thought of it. The consequence was that they sank down; they were lower than the Gentiles. For so far, the Gentiles had something to live for and something to show. What had these poor Jews? They had lost heart, they had lost courage; and (what was the most important of all things) they had lost faith. They had lost practical faith.

Well, but I should like to know, beloved friends, whether there is not this same danger amongst you — whether there is not a danger of that for me, because supposing, now, we come in fresh and happy through the name of

the Lord Jesus, yet, we at once find ourselves in by no means smooth waters.

We find there are storms; we find there are rocks and shoals, and we find, also, that our boats are not very strong, and that we are not very skilful either, in managing them, that is, we come into difficulties. Is it not so? And after we have encountered a little rough weather we are apt to get downcast and dispirited. We find fault with this one or that one. Is it not so? Now, I am not the least denying that there are faults, but then let us not forget that we have faults; and, further, that it is not a question of whether I or you have got faults — one or other or both (which is a little nearer the truth), but the great point is this — whether you and I are looking to the Lord or not. This is the thing that makes the heart happy — confidence in looking to the Lord, and also my living in this looking to the Lord, not merely for myself, but for you; for this is the true way to win another, that is, to be looking to the Lord about the other. Supposing there is a person that you have got something against, or that has got something against you; how is it to be met? Not by wit, not by power, not by influence. Not all the brethren can set it to rights, but the Lord can, and the moment that our heart has got perfectly settled in this, it gives quietness and confidence — it gives peace and assurance for ever. The Lord grant that it may be so with us!

But what I press again is this, that the point here is the daily life — the social, civil life of Israel, and not merely that which was manifest by religion, but it is the bringing God into the common matters of life, of every-day life. That was the grand point here, and there it was that Israel failed. No doubt they failed, as we have seen,

in the Book of Ezra, because the two things go together, and you will never find that the person who enjoys much in worship fails much in walk; but you will find, on the contrary, that where there is feebleness of faith in the worship of the Lord, there will be feebleness also in the walk. What God looks for is that there should be faith in both, and where there is faith there will be faithfulness. That is the secret of it. It is, after all, a want of being with God touching every matter, whether it is what concerns the worship of the saints or what concerns the walk day by day. There is only one resource for both, and the same for both.

Now this is what filled the heart of Nehemiah. He feels about it. He spreads it out, even when the king was speaking. And here is what I wish to shew, how truly it is a question of faith. “The king said unto me, For what dost thou make request?” What does he do? Does he make a request to the king? No, he makes request to God. “So I prayed to the God of heaven.” It is not that he does not tell the king; but, even at that very moment, in the presence of the king himself, his heart was to the Lord. No wonder he got his request. No wonder that God listened and heard, and he could take it as from Him. Why? Because he prayed to the Lord first. It was not that he did not own the king, but the fresh first-fruits, so to speak, surely were due to the Lord.

“And 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.

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 unto 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." The letters were granted. The timber and other materials that he lacked were vouchsafed by the king, and he goes up guarded to Jerusalem, and the same thing that filled his heart with joy and thankfulness in the midst of his sorrow grieved the enemies of the people of God.

But there is another thing, too, and that is that we must not be too much occupied with what other people do or say. Mark Nehemiah. Now his heart was with the people of God, but, for all that, he knew what it was to act in dependence upon God; and this comes out most markedly at the very start. You will help the people of God most when you are looking to God most simply. It is not looking to the people and trying to get them up.

No, but I must look to the Lord myself. "So," says he (verse 12), "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." It was no matter of pomp or show, or anything that would be usual among men. It was not a question of bringing a number of engineers and other skilled artisans to see what was to be done; but he himself: his heart was in it. He does not wait for all that. He goes about it at once with all simplicity, and he goes about it by night with the express

purpose that he might take a view at once without drawing attention — needless attention. It was not that there was anything that he owed to others. Want of candour would be a sad thing amongst the people of God, but it was no question of candour. Here it was wisdom, and the man that does not know when to be silent will hardly know when to speak. It is a great thing to learn that there is a season for both. He went out by night, then, and he saw it all, and saw it in the depth of sadness, and took a full view. “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 rest that did the work.” It was between his own soul and God, with the few men that were then with him. “Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste.” His soul entered more deeply than ever — realised, as we shall see, the state of things more than ever. “Then I told them of the hand of my God which was upon me.” Two things, you observe — sense of ruin, confidence in God, and both found together filling his heart. And look at the effect of it. They said, “Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.” Thus, you see, when a man of faith goes forward he goes forward, not in his own power or wit, but with a broken spirit and in dependence upon God. The hand of the feeble are strengthened for the work. It is God that helps. It is God that has the glory, but God making use of the faith of a man. So he did here.

Nevertheless, the moment that God begins to act, the devil tries to hinder. “But when Sanballat, the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem, the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us” (Neh. 2:19). This was the first effort of the

enemy. It was to pour contempt upon a work so simple and insignificant; but, further, it was the manifestation of their malice. Nevertheless, God used it for their good. Nehemiah learns more than ever before the adversaries that were there. But this is no reason to be alarmed. As the apostle Paul says, “An effectual door, but many adversaries.” So it was with Nehemiah now. There was an effectual door opened. The adversaries in no way frightened him. “Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we, his servants, will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial in Jerusalem.”

## Nehemiah 3

But this is not all. This next chapter shows us the names and the work of those that took part in the building of the walls. “Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they builded the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up the doors of it; even unto the tower of Meah they sanctified it, unto the tower of Hananeel. And next unto him builded the men of Jericho” (Neh. 3:1).

Let me call your attention to the grace of God here noticing the work of everyone; and, further, in showing the distinctive character, for this was an important thing to remember. There is not one of you, beloved friends, who has not a work to do for the Lord. Are you doing it? Further, there is a work that you can do better than any other.

It is a very great mistake to suppose that the work of God depends upon great powers. I do not deny that there is such a thing as God giving a man gift according to his ability, because the Lord Himself says so. And I do

not mean that the same gift is to be in a man of small ability as in a man of large ability. Certainly not; but I still say that there is a work that is suitable even where the ability may be ever so small, and a work that can be done better by that man of small ability than by the man of larger; for that very fact shows him his own proper work, whereas another work can be done not only as well, but better, by another. In short, there is no place where the right person in the right place is more important than in the church of God, and the Holy Ghost fills and fits the servants. I do not mean, now, merely those that preach, and those that teach, for there is no greater blunder than to suppose that this, and this only is the work of the Lord.

Indeed, what is called “ministry” is distinguished from “preaching,” as you will find in Romans 12. The apostle speaks about the teacher giving himself to his teaching, but he that ministereth to his ministry; now-a-days people call “ministry” — merely preaching or teaching. But that is not the language of the Holy Ghost. There is a great deal of serving — saints’ serving — that is done by persons who have no such power. And hence you find a phrase that is very common among us, that is, of people saying, “I was ministering such a day. I was ministering,” or something of that kind; or, “Some other person was ministering.” Well, now, this is only a mistake. The fact is, perhaps, that it would be no great loss if there was less ministering in that way, and more ministering in a real way.

In short, that which God calls us to is simply to do His will, but we are apt to prefer that which falls in with our own thoughts and our own feelings and our own notions, instead of finding that in which God blesses us most.

Now, the caring for souls — the binding up of those that are broken in spirit — the interesting ourselves in the troubles and trials and difficulties of the saints of God — is of great price with Him, and there is that kind of ministering that, I am afraid, is very imperfectly performed amongst us. This is really the meaning of ministry — not so much speaking. I do not wish to depreciate what is said. It would not become me; it would not become anyone. But I affirm that Scripture distinguishes ministry from mere speaking, and that is what I refer to.

Ministry, properly, and according to the word of God, is a much more practical work of helping the saints of God. I do not mean merely with money. Here is another misapprehension. People think that the only way to help the saints of God is by giving them money. That is falling into the snare of the devil, because money is what governs the world, and it makes the saints of God to be the slaves of money. No, beloved friends, we have to raise our eyes to the Lord. We know the ruined state, or we ought to know the ruined state, of that which God has brought us into, and, truly, we should not have to correct such mistakes as these if there were not as true a ruin now as there was in Nehemiah’s time, as far as the object of his affections was concerned.

Well, then, God marks here His appreciation of the various services performed by the different saints of God — the different members, at any rate, of God’s people. I am only applying it now to the saints, of course. We find, then, that they come before us in their order. The fish gate builded some; and, again, others repaired, as we are told, this or that. The old gate repaired Jehoiada, but we are told further that, while the Tekoites repaired,

their nobles put not their necks to the work of the Lord. Oh, what a solemn rebuke this is — that the men who ought to have been most of all at the head, most of all encouraging, the men who had the means to do it best — they attained the painful and unenviable notoriety, and the solemn rebuke in the word of God that they put not their necks to the work of their Lord. God is not indifferent. God notices, and no excuses will set aside His rebuke. “And next unto them,” we are told, “repaired Melatiah the Gibeonite.” But this is not all. “The son of Hur, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem,” is found. If, therefore, there were those — and there were a few who held back — we find that there is noble service on the part of some, real devotedness.

Then. in the twelfth verse we read: “Next unto him repaired Shallum — the son of Halohesh, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, he and his daughters.” This is an important thing, too. It is a very great mistake to suppose that women have not a seemly and a weighty place in the work of the Lord. Indeed they have, and the apostle Paul takes good care to show it. Let me refer to Philippians for a few moments, just to show where they can help and where not. The fourth chapter of Philippians gives us a beautiful picture, not without sorrow, but, nevertheless, full of profit. “I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord.” The work of the Lord very often brings difficulties, and the reason is not that it ought not to be carried on with a pure mind, but, alas! that will so often mingles with it. These two women, both of them valued by the apostle, were at variance more or less. “And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow” — Epaphroditus, I suppose he refers to — “help those

women” (referring to these very ones) “which laboured with me in the gospel.”

It would be wrong to suppose from this, that they had been preaching the gospel along with the apostle Paul: it does not mean that. I dare say many persons have drawn that inference from it — that Paul recognised them as fellow-preachers of the gospel with himself; but that is not the case. The meaning of the word, the proper and true meaning — and it is important to bring it out here — is this: that they shared the trials of the gospel when the gospel went there, and when it was in a time of trial. These noble-hearted women joined themselves in all the conflicts of the gospel. They bore the reproach of it. They were acting in every possible means — perhaps, in opening their houses — perhaps in hospitality to those that went there with the word, perhaps in seeking souls, praying with them, inviting them — a thousand things that women can do a great deal better than men. And accordingly, the apostle shows that he was very sensible of this. He tells Epaphroditus to help those women. It is very likely the brethren rather slighted them, and that Epaphroditus, being a person of much fellowship of mind with the apostle, would enter into his thought and feeling. “I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me — shared with me the trials of the gospel” — that is the thought. It is no question about preaching, but of sharing the trials of the gospel — “with Clement also, and with other my fellow-labourers, whose names are in the book of life.”

We do not find any such thing in Scripture as women preaching, any more than women teaching — in public. There are women that had a gift, even of prophecy. I am

not in the least denying that, and if a gift is given it is meant to be used; but then it must be used according to the mind of God. We hear of four daughters of Philip that prophesied: no doubt they exercised the gift in a proper way. Women can help women. Women need not think that that is too slight a thing for their gift. It does not become women, surely, to despise women, and, therefore, to complain of labouring in that sphere would be uncomely, particularly in a woman; but there are proprieties that God never forgets in His work; and as even in the church of God it was forbidden for a woman to speak, so much more before the world. The fact is that to preach before the world would not have entered into a woman's head in those days. It is in later times, and in these lands, where notions of liberty have spread very much, that women now almost forget that they are women — that is their danger — so much is the line broken down between men and women in the world now. And this thing is going on rapidly to the very greatest injury of both men and women. However that may be, God gives the blaze of true honour to the women doing the true work of the Lord that becomes them. We have it here, then, signalised.

Further, we are told of other persons that helped in the most interesting way in various parts, but this would clearly occupy me longer than I wish to-night, for I wish to take a survey of the book, so that I can only commend the matter to yourselves to look into various details of the chapter. You will see how carefully God registers the varied services of the different members of His people.

## Nehemiah 4

“But it came to pass that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews” (Neh. 4:1). It was bad enough to find the work was begun. It was a great deal worse to find that it was going on, and that Nehemiah was not so easily frightened. Sanballat had threatened to report him as a rebel against the king; but where the heart is simple there is no such reason for alarm, and the more firm Nehemiah was in giving honour to the powers that be, the more he could afford to slight the threats and scorn of Sanballat.

“And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they make an end in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?” Now the other man, Tobiah, joined him — “Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall.” What does Nehemiah say? At once he turns to the Lord — “Hear, O our God, for we are despised.” So it was also in the early days of the church of God. The apostles were beaten, and were threatened, but what did they? They spread it out before the Lord, and the Lord answered. He answers with His own power. The Spirit shakes the building where they are, and, with great power, He gave them to witness for Him.

Yes, but here was a day of weakness, and what I would impress upon your mind and my own is that we are no longer in the day when the Spirit shakes the building. We are no longer in the day of power and glory. We are no longer in the day when signs and wonders are

wrought. But are we, therefore, without God? What do we value most? — the powers and wonders God works, or God Himself? This is the great question. Have we confidence in the presence of God with us, and do we value the presence of God above all the powers and miracles that ever were wrought? It is a very simple question: so it was now for Nehemiah. There was no such thing as the Red Sea opened for the people — no such thing as the Jordan crossed. There was no manna that fell down from heaven, but there was the evident word of God accomplished, and the way was open for them. There was an open door, an open door to that place where the Lord's eyes were continually — the land of God for the people of God. They had lost it as a matter of outward power, but not for faith. For they clung to God, even when God could not outwardly own them before all the world. This made it a trial, no doubt, but faith would find the trial most profitable.

And this is what I would further impress — that there is very often in thought, and sometimes in expression, a kind of complaint of the want of power. Now I distrust that. I never came out to power, and I should be sorry for anybody else to do it; but am I come out to the Lord? Am I come out because it is His will? — because it is His word? Let us be ever so weak, there He would have us be. There is nothing so sure as that, and, allow me to say, there is nothing that keeps us so truly and so steady, whereas, on the contrary, we may fall into the snare of clericalism if we are too much occupied with power.

Suppose a meeting, an assembly of God's people, where, by the remarkable gift of one, or two, or three individuals, everything went on with apparent beauty — every prayer thoroughly according to the truth —

suppose, too, that everything that was done was done with intelligence: yet if the action and presence of the Spirit of God were ignored — I should feel that this was the most miserable meeting possible. It would be hollow; and we ought not to be deceived. It is not merely two or three persons that hide the shame and the weakness of the assembly altogether. The all-important thing, beloved brethren, is that God's children should be gathered round His name, and that the Spirit of God should be left in freedom to act. Consequently, as sure as we are acting with truth, weakness will appear, neither will the state of the assembly be the same thing from week to week. And it is far more important that we should be in the truth than that there should be a manifestation of power. A manifestation of power might be only a veil thrown over the true state of the assembly, and only the improper and unspiritual activity of two or three men of gift that would falsify the true state of that assembly. Now, I say, it is far better to have all the pains and penalties and sorrows of weakness than a state that is not true in the sight of God; and, of all things, that we ought to be in the truth of our condition. I am persuaded that anything is bad that would cause us to forget that, after all, we are only a remnant; and that the more we enjoy the truth, the more deeply are we called to feel the broken state of the church of God.

Another thing, too. There is often the idea that if we could only get the most spiritual and the most intelligent of all Christians together, what a happy meeting it would be! Yes, but, beloved friends, it would be all wrong, because that is not what we are called to. What warrants us to pick and choose among the people of God? Who gave us the title, even, to wish such a thing? Now, I feel

the very contrary, and believe it to be of God, if, indeed, my brethren, you have got the secret of the Lord — if, indeed, you have the Spirit of God left free, I would rather look out for the lame, I would rather look out for the weak. I would rather try and get those that are in want, those that are feeble, those that are in danger. The strong ones, or, at any rate, those that think themselves strong, we must leave in the hands of the Lord; but, surely, the weak ones are those that the true, the real, the Good Shepherd cares for most; and we ought to feel like the Good Shepherd. The theory of gathering together only the best and the most intelligent is, therefore, a false theory. It is utterly contrary to the true principle of grace and truth. No, beloved friends, the only right thing is this: we do not pretend, we do not look for, we do not expect, that God will gather all His saints; but the moment we are in a position that we are not free and open to all the saints of God, we are false. It is not that I look for their coming, but the question is whether my heart is towards them all. If it is not towards them all, then I am a sectarian.

This, beloved friends, is exactly where Nehemiah was. His heart was towards them all, though it was only a poor little remnant. Why, after all, that remnant, when it came out, was only 42,000 and a few odd, and some seven thousand servants, that is, it was under 50,000, counting them all, masters and servants, and this was all the remnant of Israel. Time was when even Judah alone — one tribe — had no less than 450,000 fighting men. I mention this merely to show how great the wreck — how complete the ruin was.

Well now, Nehemiah — the same Nehemiah that loved the people, and whose heart went out to every one that

was of Israel, whether they came or not, he whose heart received them in all their weakness, seeking, of course, to strengthen them, seeking to impart the intelligence that God had given his own soul, but not accepting and not receiving them upon any such ground as this, but receiving them because they were the Lord's, receiving them all in the Lord's land, where the Lord will have them be — now spreads out before God the insults and scorn and threats of these enemies of the Lord. This calmed his spirit. He was not uneasy. God listened and heard. "Hear, O our God; for we are despised; and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity: and cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders. So built we the wall" (vers. 4- 6).

But it became more serious, so much so that there was a conspiracy among the enemies to come and fight. "Nevertheless, we made our prayer unto our God." One of the most striking features is that it was not merely the people that read the Bible. It was not merely the people that grew in the knowledge of the Scripture. That they did, and we shall find the proof of it. But the first thing that was found in these early days was prayer. There was a spirit of prayerfulness among them. They went to God. They brought everything to God, and, consequently, had the grace of God working in them, and the wisdom of God that was imparted to them. We find, accordingly, that Nehemiah quietly takes measures, and he "set the people after their families with their swords, their spears and their bows. And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the

Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your houses."

Well, the same thing has to be done now. I do not mean in the same way now. With the Christian it is not a question of fighting with the sword, but, undoubtedly, we have to fight the good fight of faith. It is not merely that we have to work, but we have to withstand as well as to stand in this evil day; that is, we have to be armed against the wiles of the devil, and not merely to be carrying on the peaceful work of the Lord. So it was then with the remnant of Judah, and he gives them direction, as they were scattered, that the trumpet was to communicate. The trumpet was to give a certain sound — a very important thing for us, too. "In what place, therefore, ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye hither unto us: our God shall fight for us. So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared" (verse 21).

## Nehemiah 5

But there is another and a most sorrowful state of things which the 5th chapter reveals to us, and that is, the heart was wrong with considerable part of the remnant. And another thing, too, is very sorrowful. It was not only that the nobles of Tekoa failed when the rest were faithful in the work; but here "is a cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews."

"We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards and houses that we might buy corn, because of the dearth. There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards.

Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters." Nehemiah was very angry, and "rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them. And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye, even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer. Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God, because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?" (vers. 3-9).

So he pleads with them, and the consequence is that his rebuke was blessed of the Lord. "Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them that they should do according to this promise" (verse 12). But he added a most solemn denunciation of such conduct for the future. "Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised Jehovah. And the people did according to this promise."

There is nothing like example. If you want devotedness, the great thing is to begin with yourself. Be you devoted individually. If you want love, show love. You will very often find that the men who most claim love are those that least manifest it. Now that is not the way of God, and so it is, beloved friends, not merely with love — take lowliness. Who is it that most complains of the pride of others? The proudest men among you. Now, my friends,

that has nothing to do with position. You may find a man who is what men would call in a good position after the flesh or the world, and the man who wants to pull him down has a great deal more pride than the man who is in that position, even supposing the richer man may not be all that one could wish. But then we have to take care of our spirit, beloved brethren. We have to take care of what our object is.

Now, I do not say this with regard to a man wanting to maintain his place; but I do say that the spirit that seeks to pull down is as sure pride as can be found in this earth, and that what God looks for is this: no matter in what position we are, we should all seek to be found according to Christ; but to dictate to others, or to wish to deal with others, is a poor way of accomplishing the will of the Lord, or carrying out His glory. Nehemiah did not act thus. “Moreover,” says he, “from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor.” There was grace, nay, more than that. “But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God. Yea, also I continued in the work of this wall, neither bought we any land: and all my servants were gathered thither unto the work (vers. 14-16).

Nor was this all. “Moreover, there were at my table an hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers besides those that came unto us from among the heathen that are about us. Now that which was prepared for me daily was

one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine: yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people. Think upon me, my God, for good; according to all that I have done for this people." He loved them, and there were the fruits of it most manifest.

## Nehemiah 6

But now there is a new plan adopted by the enemy. They had failed to alarm. The governor was on his guard, and the people accordingly. The next thing we find is they proposed a meeting. Why should not they live at peace? Why should they not have communion with one another? "Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief. And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" You see, it was not merely some ordinary call. It was that with which the glory of God was bound up. As long as the remnant were not in the place that God had given them as the city where His eyes were — as long as it was a mere heap of ruins — it was evident that it might be an object of compassion; but there was no witness for the Lord there. So, we are told, they sent unto him four times, and he answered them after the same manner.

But there was, next after this, another effort made. They sent persons to preach of him in Jerusalem — "There is a king in Judah," and to pretend that Nehemiah was affecting the throne. "Come now, therefore, and let us take counsel together." This was a friendly warning as it appeared. "Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no

such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart. For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done."

There was a third effort, still more subtle (ver. 10). "I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God." Here was an enemy within. He proposed to Nehemiah to hide himself in the temple. Nehemiah utterly refuses. "And I said, Should such a man as I flee?" Where would have been his faith? How could a man leave the children, and show that all he cared for was his own personal safety? Besides, there would have been a flagrant defiance of the glory of God. It was contrary to God for an Israelite to use the sanctuary of Jehovah as the heathen did. The heathen made their sanctuaries to be a place of refuge in case of danger to their life; but God never permitted such a thing in His temple. His temple was for His worship, according to His word. This was, therefore, an heathenish idea that was suggested to Nehemiah, and this by a prophet, but he gave a false prophecy. Nehemiah "perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me; for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him." Oh, what schemes, what devices, if possible, to drag the people, and to drag a servant of God among the people, from the path of faith! So all these things were detected by simplicity, by cleaving to the word of the Lord.

## Nehemiah 7

This chapter shows us the people with the wall built, and the register of the people named with great care, on which I need not enter.

## Nehemiah 8

But, in the 8th chapter, we have them gathered together "as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe, to bring the book of the law of Moses, which Jehovah had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate, from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose (vers. 1-4).

"And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed Jehovah, the great God: and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped Jehovah with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly" (vers. 5-8).

Here was another feature, and mark, beloved friends, this studying, this learning, this profiting by the law of Jehovah was after they had found themselves in their true position. You will never find that men grow in knowledge in a false position. They may, no doubt, learn enough gospel to bring their souls to God, and they may learn certain moral duties, and we must thank God for it. We must not be slow of heart to own what God works, wherever He works; but never expect intelligence of the mind of God unless you are where God would have you be. And it is evident that what is good for one is good for all, and that what God gives as His will for His people is binding upon all His people. Here, then, they were assembled. They were assembled in God's city — in God's land, and here it is that the law profits.

I do not say that in Babylon and Assyria there were not souls that read the law of the Lord; but everything was so out of course — so opposed by circumstances so little agreeing with them — that in such a state the mind always glides over the word. The word does not make the same impression. The truths of scripture do not tell upon the heart. When you are in a true position all becomes luminous according to the goodness and sovereignty of God. So, we find, it was here, and not before, that the law of God gets its full place; and Nehemiah, as we are told, and Ezra the priest, and the Levites, said unto all the people, "This day is holy unto Jehovah your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law." But there is a season to rejoice as well as to weep. There is a time when we must not eat the bread of mourners. So it was here. "So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye

grieved. And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them." We ought to enjoy the truth of God.

The people accordingly, then, are found in the seventh month gathering together to keep the feast of tabernacles; and this they did, so that since the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day they had not done as they did then. A solemn fact. What had they been about all these hundreds of years? The Spirit of God records for our instruction that the feast of tabernacles had lost its place, practically, amongst the Israelites since the days of Joshua. The reason is evident. Why that feast? Why had it been disused? To tell you that they were in wars, that they were in troubles, is no real answer. No doubt there was fighting in the days of Joshua, and there were troubles in the days of the judges; but then came in David and Solomon. Why was not the feast of tabernacles celebrated then, as it was now?

The reason seems to me plain, and that is that they were so occupied with the present rest that they forgot the future — just the way in which the Lord's coming passed out of the minds of Christendom. For hundreds of years people thought nothing about it; they were not interested in it. They were settled down in the earth. They were occupied with the work of the Lord. The hope was not sweet to them. They were no longer living in the hope of the Lord's coming. God has raised it, and brought it in in a very low day. So it was here the gathering together of the people — the true gathering in, not merely that partial work which had been wrought when they were brought into the land under Joshua. It

was then, on the contrary, that the keeping of the feast went out. And, now, in this low day, when things were at the most painfully weak point they had ever reached, it was then that there was faithfulness — not power, but faithfulness. When there was fidelity, and cleaving to the work of the Lord, then they began to find the importance of the feast of tabernacles. Their hearts were looking onward to the great gathering in, when the harvest and the vintage had taken place. “And there was very great gladness. Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner.”

## Nehemiah 9

In the 9th chapter there is another thing that followed. It is when the heart enters thus spiritually into the word — when there is subjection of heart to it, and when the bright hope of the people of God fills the heart with joy — it is then that we can have a deeper sorrow. It is the greatest mistake to suppose that one truth is antagonistic to another. “In the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting.” The more you fill the hearts of the saints of God with God’s future for His people, the more they feel their present shortcomings. This was right. This is the true and divine way of delivering us either from self-deceit, on the one hand, or from the power of the world, on the other. They are found confessing their sins, and mark how they did it. “And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.” And so they gathered together, and poured out the heart before

the Lord. They owned their real state, but, at the same time, the heart turned to God with full confidence.

They further joined together and sealed the covenant before the Lord after their Jewish manner, in Nehemiah 10. We have the rulers also, in Nehemiah 11; and then we have an account of the priests and Levites that went up with Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, in Nehemiah 12. On all these details I forbear to enter tonight. It would occupy me longer than would be reasonable; but I may observe that the last chapter gives us a final view of the work of Nehemiah.

## Nehemiah 13

It was now some time since the remnant had returned. When Nehemiah looks into the practical state, he finds a sorrowful feature — a great departure from the primitive spirit of separation, and I ask you, beloved brethren, whether we have not got to search and see whether it be not so with ourselves. We have continually to watch and to guard. It is not that one does not rejoice at the Lord bringing in, and if the Lord brought in ten times more to His children than are brought in now, for my part I should give God thanks; but I should not be blind to the danger. I should not be blind to the danger that the incoming of tenfold more would bring in tenfold more reason for humiliation — not for the less joy, but for the more watchfulness. And so we find on this occasion that “On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever” (ver. 1) — it was like a new thing: they had not

thought of it before — “because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water.”

First principles, you see, they returned to. “It came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude.” There it was: they had read it over and over again before. Now they applied it. It is not merely that we want the word, but we want the Spirit of God to make the word living. And now that they found its application they acted upon it. “And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, was allied unto Tobiah.” No wonder that there were sources of weakness. We see this man, Tobiah, the standing enemy of the people of God — but mark what has come in. “And he had prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat offerings” — this man had found a place even in the sanctuary of God, in the house! — “the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil, which was commanded to be given to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the offerings of the priests. But in all this time was not I at Jerusalem.”

It would appear that Nehemiah paid two visits to Jerusalem, and that during his absence, there was this departure from first principles. “In the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon, came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king” — that is, a second leave besides the first. The first was in the twentieth year, and this was a dozen years after. “And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.” Why, there was

nothing so serious even when Nehemiah came the first time!

But there is another important principle. What did Nehemiah do? Did he stay away from the house of God? Did he not go up to worship there? It never occurred to him to do such a thing as stop away: nor ought we. Evil in another person is no reason for staying away from the table of the Lord — none whatever; for, surely, if that were a sufficient reason, it would be a reason for all that are righteous, and supposing all that are righteous were to stay away, where would be the Lord's table? No, beloved friends, it is a false and a bad principle. What is true is this: if there be evil there, look to God that you meet the evil in a good way. Look to God for wisdom to deal with it according to His word. Look to God to strengthen the hands of those that care for the glory of the Lord.

It is not the presence of evil that destroys the character of the Lord's table, but the refusal to judge it. There might be the most fearful evil: that is not a reason to stay away from the table of the Lord; but if I knew that there was the most desperate evil here at Woolwich, for instance, I should not stay away because of that but come down, perhaps, to help you. If I knew of it, and could help you, it would be my duty to do so — not to come down and do the work for you, but to come down and lay the responsibility upon you to look to God for grace and wisdom to do the work; for you are responsible. And so it was with Nehemiah. He did not stay away because Tobiah had managed, through the high-priest's influence, to have a chamber in the house of God. But he came to Jerusalem and understood of this evil, and "it grieved me sore." That was the first effect.

“And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber,” for an Israelite was entitled to act: everyone was bound. “Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and thither brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense.”

There is, however, this difference now — that God would have the church to act together. For not even an apostle would act alone. When the apostle heard of something fearful at Corinth he did not refuse to write, and he did not say to them, ‘Ye are no longer the church of God.’ On the contrary, he writes most carefully. He says, “To the church which is at Corinth,” and he links them with all the saints that were on earth — “with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2). He tells them of the fearful evil that he knew was there, and he says that he has judged what is to be done, but he tells them to judge. His judging would not do: they must judge. They must prove themselves clear in the matter, and this was the way in which God worked in the church. So I press this strongly as being full of instruction, the grand difference, you observe, being this — that the Spirit of God brings in a judgment of evil. We enjoy Christ together. I am not permitted to go to my home and take a bit of bread there and some wine, and fancy that it is the Lord’s Supper: it is no such thing. That is a mere feast of my own that I am devising out of my own heart. But I come and take it in communion, and in true communion open to all the saints of God in the world that are walking according to the Lord; and, doing so, I look to God to work among His people to clear out whatever is inconsistent with that holy fellowship.

That is what Nehemiah did now. He knows and feels their grief, and he acts; only, as I have said, there is individuality of action here, whereas now there must be communion. And he sees everywhere other things very disorderly. He perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been together; “for the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field. Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together, and set them in their place.” And, further — “In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath.”

A very important principle there is here. Now I do not mean to say that we are under the sabbatical law, but what I do say is that we need grace, and that the day of grace ought to be, at least, as important in our eyes as the sabbath was to the man of law. And it would be a very sinful thing, beloved brethren, if we were to take advantage of the Lord’s day for our own selfish purposes. The Lord’s day has a character of holiness beyond the sabbath day. The Lord’s day has a claim of

grace upon all the children of grace. May we never forget this. It is not that we are not to use it in the spirit of grace and liberty; but to use it for self is not to use it for Christ. It is to do what the Gentiles would do that know pot God. May we never be like them.

And, further, he draws attention to a still more terrible fact. “In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod.” Everything was out of course. “And I contended with them.” He seems to have dealt with the greatest severity, “and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.” He shows how even Solomon had gone astray through this very thing. Thus there is no thought of taking an example of evil to make light of evil now, but he warns even from the very highest in a day of great weakness. And, further, “one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib, the high priest, was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite”; there was no respect of persons — “therefore I chased him from me.” “Thus cleansed I them from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business: and for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the first-fruits.”

Thus, I trust, we have seen, a little more clearly and fully, the general scope of this most weighty book.

W.K.