Nehemiah - Commentaries by Edward B. Dennett

Exposition on Nehemiah, Nehemiah 8:13-18: Exposition on Nehemiah

Article from https://bibletruthpublishers.com/bible-truth-study-bible/btsb

Chapter 8 continued

The following day there was another gathering, composed of "the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites"; these came "unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law." v. 13. It is beautiful to notice this increasing desire for the knowledge of the Word of God—a sure sign that God was working in their hearts, inasmuch as obedience to it is a necessary expression of the divine life. When thus assembled, they "found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month: and that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written." vv. 14, 15. Then we are told that "the people went forth," etc.

But it will be seen from Lev. 23 that the day appointed for this feast of tabernacles was the fifteenth day of the seventh month, so that a 13 days' interval must be placed between verses 15 and 16, as it was on the second day of the month that they found the precept as to the feast (vv. 13, 14). This interval would be occupied with the proclamation of the coming observance of the festival (v. 15), to give the people "in all their cities" the time required to gather themselves together at Jerusalem. When assembled, they proceed to keep the feast as enjoined in the law; they fetched the branches from the mount "and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephraim" (v. 16); and in the next verse we read, that "since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so"; that is, not that they had not kept the feast of tabernacles, for they had done this on their return from captivity (Ezra 3), but that they had not complied with the injunction to dwell in booths during the days of the feast. It was the first time since Joshua that they had made themselves, in this manner, booths of pine, myrtle, and palm branches. This is another proof of the energetic action of the Spirit of God at this moment, leading the people to exact obedience to the Word of their God. It is thereon added, "And there was very great gladness." Joy indeed was also the significance of this feast, millennial joy; for, after the directions concerning the booths, it is written, "And ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days." And during this period they were to dwell in booths, "that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." Lev. 23:40-43.

If the reader will consult Lev. 23, he will see that the feast of tabernacles completes the cycle of feasts, and therefore sets forth the end and result of all the ways of God with His earthly people, which will be to set them in His grace, now that they have forfeited all under responsibility, in virtue of the work of Christ, in perfect blessing in their own land, after the harvest and the vintage. Joy throughout the perfect period (seven days) will be therefore the appropriate expression of their sense of Jehovah's goodness and grace. But while "gladness" was to characterize the festival, they were to remember the past—their deliverance from Egypt and their pilgrim wanderings in the desert—and thus that redemption through the blood of the passover lamb (for that was the foundation of all God's subsequent actings on behalf of His people) and the relationship to God into which they were consequently brought (I am Jehovah your God) was the source of all the blessing and joy on which they had entered. In the case before us the gladness was but transient, for, in truth, the festival was as yet only prophetic; but, as prophetic, it might have taught them the unchangeable verity of God as to all His promises on their behalf; and wherever it did so, it would enable them to rejoice in anticipation of this joyful time of blessing which was secured to them by the infallible word of their God.1

The whole time of the feast seems to have been devoted—"from the first day unto the last day"—to reading "in the book of the law of God." That was the present felt need; "and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner." (See Lev. 23:36.) In the early days of Ezra (chap. 3) restoration of the sacrifices marked the observance of this feast, but here, the re-establishment of the law. Both observances were defective, though according to God as far as they went; for in Ezra there were no booths, and in Nehemiah, as it would seem, no sacrifices. This teaches us one of God's ways in all revivals. One forgotten truth is restored and pressed with power upon the hearts and consciences of His people, a truth necessary for their restoration and preservation in the special circumstances of the moment. Thus the efficacy of the sacrifices was brought into prominence in Ezra 3; here, the authority of the Word of God. The same thing has been seen again and again in the history of the Church. In the remarkable work of the Spirit of God through Luther and others, the truth of justification by faith alone occupied the foremost place; and in another movement, almost within our own days, it was the presence of the Holy Ghost on earth and the second advent of Christ. God has wrought in such ways, in every age, for His own glory and for the welfare of His people. But such is the feebleness and folly of the hearts of His people, that they have often turned His mercy toward them into an occasion for self-exaltation. As if unable to retain the truth in its completeness, and missing His mind

in the recovery of certain truths, they have often formed themselves into sects for their preservation. There have been but few Epaphrases in the Church who could labor fervently in prayers for the saints that they might stand perfect and complete in all the will of God (see Col. 4:12).

The seven days of the feast having been completed, there was "a solemn assembly, according unto the manner." It was on this day, "the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture bath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this," says John, "spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)" John 7:37-39. The time had not come for Jesus to show Himself to the world as He will do when the feast of tabernacles is fulfilled; but, meanwhile, having taken His place on high, He would quench the thirst of every thirsty soul that came to Him, and moreover cause, through the indwelling Spirit, to flow forth from such rivers of living water for the refreshment of those round about them. Another has said, "Observe here that Israel drank water in the wilderness before they could keep the feast of tabernacles. But they only drank. There was no well in them. The water flowed from rock." The Lord thus would teach the Jews that their feast of tabernacles (see v. 2) was but an empty rite as long as their Messiah had not come, or rather so long

as He was rejected (John 1:11).2

*For the details of the observance of this day, as indeed for the whole feast, see Numb. 29:2-39.

Exposition on Nehemiah, Nehemiah 8:1-12: Exposition on Nehemiah

Chapter 8

Before entering upon this interesting chapter, it may be profitable to point out the place it occupies. Chapter 6 gives the completion of the wall; chapter 7, the provision and means for the security of the city and the reckoning of the people by genealogy; and in chapter 8 we have the establishment of the authority of the Word of God. This order is most instructive. The walls might be built, and the people duly gathered and ordered; but nothing but obedience to the Word could keep them in the place into which they had been brought; for obedience gives the Lord His place, as also the people their place—the Lord the place of pre-eminence, the people that of subjection. Obedience is, therefore, the way of holiness, exclusive as it is of everything inconsistent with the Lord's supreme claims. This furnishes a practical lesson of great moment for the Church. The testimony of God gathers souls to Christ on the ground of the one body; but as soon as they are gathered, then it is the responsibility of teachers and pastors to assert the Lord's supremacy in the authority of the written Word, to feed the flock of God with suited nourishment, to build them up on their most holy faith, and thus to fortify them against the arts and devices of the enemy.

We have seen that Nehemiah reproduces, in chapter 7, Ezra 2; and the first verse of this chapter is in exact correspondence with Ezra 3:1. There we read: "And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem"; here it is: "And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate"; and in verse 2 we find that this gathering was also "upon the first day of the seventh month." It is the date that explains, in both cases, the assembly. The first day of the seventh month was the feast of the blowing of trumpets (Lev. 23:24; Numb. 29:1), a figure of the restoration of Israel in the last days, and one that would therefore appeal mightily, where there was any understanding of its import, to the hearts of all true Israelites. Whether in this case the trumpets were blown is not recorded; but the very fact that it is not, is significant. "They spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel." When all is in confusion, through neglect of the Word of God, the first thing to be done is not the restoration of feasts, but of the authority of the Scriptures over the conscience. Instead, therefore, of the blowing of the trumpets,1 there was a solemn assembly for the reading of the law—the very memory of which seems to have faded away from the people. And it is exceedingly beautiful to notice, that Ezra, of whom there is no previous mention in this book, is he to whom they have recourse in the present need. He was "a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of His statutes to Israel" and one who delighted in and fed upon the Word he communicated to others. But in the time of almost general backsliding, confusion, and ruin, the teacher of the law was not wanted; and thus it was that Ezra had fallen out of notice, if not into obscurity. Now, however, that there was in some sort a revival, producing a desire after the Word of their God, Ezra was remembered, and his services were required. Happy the servant who, thinking nothing of himself, can retire when he is not needed, and come forth when once again desired, willing to be anything or nothing, known or unknown, if he can but serve the Lord's beloved people!

In verses 2 and 3 we have the account of the assembly for the purpose of hearing the Word. The congregation was composed of "men and women, and all that could hear with understanding"; that is, we judge, all the children who were old enough to comprehend what was read. There was, therefore, no division, but all were together as forming the congregation of the Lord. Thus gathered, Ezra read out of the book of the law "from the morning until midday"—probably not less than six hours. "And the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law." In ordinary times, it would be impossible to detain the people, then as now, so long with the simple reading of the Scriptures; but when there-is a true work of the Spirit of God after a season of widespread declension, the saints always turn afresh and with avidity to the Bible, and are never weary of reading or listening to the truths which have been used to arouse their souls. Love for the Word of God, with an intense desire to search for its hidden treasures, is always a characteristic of a genuine revival. It is this fact which explains the eagerness of the people in this chapter, on the first day of the seventh month, to hear the reading of the book of the law.

The second and third verses give the general statement, and then in verses 4-8 we have the details of this remarkable assembly. In the first place, Ezra, we are told, "stood upon a pulpit" (or tower) "of wood, which they had made for the purpose," the object being, as in modern days, that he might be seen and heard by all the congregation. Six stood beside him on his right hand and seven on his left hand; and the Spirit of God has caused their names to be recorded, for it was a memorable day, and the privilege vouchsafed to them of standing by Ezra was great. In the next place "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." This was no mere form, for the book Ezra opened was the voice of the living God to the people, and they acknowledged it as such by reverently standing. The words it contained had been first spoken by the Lord at Sinai, "out of the midst of the fire," and Israel had trembled before the holy One who spake them, and "entreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more"; and all this could not fail to be recalled by those who now stood before Ezra. They therefore stood up, as in the presence of their God; "and

Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God"; that is, he gave thanks, or in praying gave thanks to Jehovah. We find this use of the word bless in the New Testament, especially in connection with the paschal feast and the Lord's supper. Thus in Matthew, for example, it is said that "Jesus took bread, and blessed" (26:26), whereas in Luke we read that "He took bread, and gave thanks" (22:19). It is thus clear that bless, when used in this way, has the significance of thanksgiving. (See also 1 Cor. 14:16.) It is the more necessary to point this out, and to insist upon it, from the fact that a mass of sacerdotal assumptions is founded upon the perversion of the words to bless, in the endeavor to prove that the bread and the cup in the Lord's supper must first receive a priestly blessing, or be consecrated. It is maintained, for example, that when Paul says, "The cup of blessing which we bless," it means the cup which we priests bless. The light of Scripture instantly reveals the unholy character of such priestly trifling with the simple teaching of the Word of God, whereby saints are shut out from their privileges and deprived of the place of nearness and blessing into which they have been brought on the ground of redemption. (See John 20:17; Heb. 10:19-22, etc.)

At the conclusion of Ezra's prayer, or thanksgiving, "all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground." v. 6. It is a striking scene, for the Lord was working in the hearts of His people with power, and hence it was that their very attitude expressed their hallowed reverence.2 They stood while Ezra prayed, and then, together with their responses of "Amen, Amen," with uplifted hands, they worshiped with their faces to the ground.

All this was preparatory to the work of the day, which was the reading of the law, of which the next two verses give the account. "Also Jeshua, and Bani,... 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" (or with an interpretation), "and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." vv. 7, 8.

It must be remembered that the people had dwelt long in Babylon, and that many of them, under the influence of their surroundings, had adopted Babylonish habits and ways, and even the Babylonish tongue. The sacred language, the language too of their fathers, had thus fallen into disuse and had in many cases been forgotten. Then there was another source of confusion. Some of the Jews "had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: and their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people." Chap. 13:23, 24. It became necessary therefore to cause the people to understand the law, to read it distinctly or with an interpretation, to give the sense, and to cause them to understand the reading. All this is most instructive, and in two ways: first, we learn that assimilation to the world leads to forgetfulness and ignorance of the Word of God; second, that the true function of the teacher is to give the sense of the Scriptures, to explain what they mean, and to cause their hearers to understand their import. There will be also the application of the Word to the state and needs of the people; but even in this, as in the case before us, it will be as guided of the Holy Spirit to the suited portions.

The Word of God was "quick and powerful" in the hearts of the people; it was sharper than any two-edged sword, and pierced even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and discerned the thoughts and intents of their hearts; for they "wept, when they heard the words of the law." But "Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep." v. 9.

The feast of trumpets was indeed to be "a holy convocation"; and because of its typical significance, sorrow was unsuited to its character. Hence we read; "Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob. Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbral, the pleasant harp with the

psaltery. Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day. For this was a statute for Israel, and a law of the God of Jacob." Psalm 81:1-4. They were therefore to be joyful on this day in communion with the mind of their God; but joy cannot be contained; it of necessity overflows, and hence they were to communicate it to others. "Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength." v.10. This order is instructive-communion with the heart of God and then communion with their brethren. The first thing was to have their own hearts filled with the joy of the Lord, then for that joy to well out in blessing to the poor and needy, and thus they would find that the joy of the Lord was their strength.

"So the Levites," we are told, "stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy: neither be ye grieved." The time would soon come for the expression of their sorrow (chap. 9), but now they were to rejoice according to the thoughts of the heart of God for their future blessing. Truly they had need of self-judgment and contrition; but the point is, that this holy day was not suited for these things, and the Lord would have them rise above their own state and condition, and for the moment find their joy in His joy, and in His joy would be their strength. There are many saints who will understand this; when gathered, for example, around the Lord at His table to commemorate His death, there might be many things calling for sorrow and humiliation as to our condition; but it would be losing sight altogether of the mind of the Lord to confess our sins at such a season. It is the Lord's death we there remember and announce, not ourselves or our failures; and it is only as we have His objects before our souls in our being gathered that we enter into and have communion with His own heart. So it was on this first day of the seventh month; and this will explain the action of Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites in restraining the expression of the people's grief.

The people responded to the exhortation of their leaders, and "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." v. 12. And in this way they celebrated the feast according to the mind of God, if without the trumpets. They were not in a right condition for testimony; and thus the first thing was to get themselves right by the application of the Word.

The Book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah, The Book of: Chapter 8:1-12

Before entering upon this interesting chapter, it may be profitable to point out the place it occupies. Chapter 6 gives the completion of the wall; chapter 7, the provision and means for the security of the city and the reckoning of the people by genealogy, and in chapter 8 we have the establishment of the authority of the Word of God. This order is most instructive. The walls might be built, and the people duly gathered and ordered, but nothing but obedience to the Word could keep them in the place into which they had been brought, for obedience gives the Lord His place, as also the people their place. It gives the Lord the place of pre-eminence, and the people that of subjection. Obedience is, therefore, the way of holiness, exclusive as it is of everything inconsistent with the Lord's supreme claims. This furnishes a practical lesson that is most important for the Church. The testimony of God gathers souls to Christ on the ground of the one body, but as soon as they are gathered, then it is the responsibility of teachers and pastors to assert the Lord's supremacy in the authority of the written Word, to feed the flock of God with suited nourishment, to build them up on their most holy faith, and thus to fortify them against the arts and devices of the enemy,

We have seen that, in chapter 7 Nehemiah reproduces Ezra 2. The first verse of chapter 8 corresponds with Ezra 3:1. There we read: "And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem;" here it is: "And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate." In verse 2 we find that this gathering was also "upon the first day of the seventh month." It is the date that explains, in both cases, the assembly. The first day of the seventh month was the feast of the blowing of trumpets (Lev. 23:24; Numb. 29:1), a figure of the restoration of Israel in the last days, and one that would therefore appeal mightily, where there was any understanding of its import, to the hearts of all true Israelites. Whether in this case the trumpets were blown is not recorded, but the very fact that it is not, is significant. "They spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel." When all is in confusion, through neglect of the Word of God, the first thing to be done is not the restoration of feasts, but of the authority of Scripture over the conscience. Instead, therefore, of the blowing of the trumpets,1 there was a solemn assembly for the reading of the law-the very memory of which seems to have faded away from

the people. And it is exceedingly beautiful to notice that Ezra, of whom there is no previous mention in this book, is he to whom they have recourse in the present need. He was "a scribe of the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of His statutes to Israel" and one who

In verses 2 and 3 we have the account of the assembly for the purpose of hearing the Word. The congregation was composed of "men and women, and all that could hear with understanding," that is, we judge, all the children who were old enough to comprehend what was read. There was, therefore, no division, but all were together as forming the congregation of the Lord. Thus gathered, Ezra read out of the book of the law "from the morning until midday"-probably not less than six hours. "And the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law." In ordinary times, it would be impossible to detain the people, then as now, so long with the simple reading of the Scriptures, but when there is a true work of the Spirit of God after a season of widespread declension, the saints always turn afresh and with eager desire to the Bible, and are never weary of reading or listening to the truths which have been used to arouse their souls. Love for the Word of God, with an intense desire to search for its hidden treasures, is always a characteristic of a genuine revival. It is this fact which explains the eagerness of the people in this chapter, on the first day of the seventh month, to hear the reading of the book of the law.

The second and third verses give the general statement, and in verses 4-8 we have the details of this remarkable assembly. In the first place, Ezra, we are told, "stood upon a pulpit" (or tower) "of wood, which they had made for the purpose," the object being, as in modern days, that he might be seen and heard by all the congregation. Six stood beside him on his right hand and seven on his left hand, and the Spirit of God has caused their names to be recorded for it was a memorable day, and the privilege given to them of standing by Ezra was great. In the next place "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." This was no mere form, for the book Ezra opened was the voice of the living God to the people, and they acknowledged it as such by reverently standing. The words it contained had been first spoken by the Lord at Sinai, "out of the midst of the fire," and Israel had trembled before the holy One who spake them, and "entreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more;" all this could not fail to be recalled by those who now stood before Ezra. They therefore stood up, as in the presence of their God, "and Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God;" that is, he gave thanks, or in praying gave thanks to Jehovah. We find this use of the word bless in the New Testament, especially in connection with the paschal feast and the Lord's supper. Thus in Matthew, for example, it is said that "Jesus took bread, and blessed"(26:26), whereas in Luke we read that "He took bread, and gave thanks" (22:19). It is thus clear that bless, when used in this way, has the significance of thanksgiving. (See also 1 Cor. 14:16.) It is the more necessary to point this out, and to insist upon it, from the fact that a mass of sacerdotal assumptions is founded upon the perversion of the words to bless, in the endeavor to prove that the bread and the cup in the Lord's supper must first receive a priestly blessing, or be consecrated. It is maintained, for example, that when Paul says, "The cup of blessing which we bless," it means the cup which we priests bless. The light of Scripture instantly reveals the unholy character of such priestly trifling with the simple teaching of the Word of God, whereby the saints are shut out from their privileges and deprived of the place of nearness and blessing into which they have been brought on the ground of redemption. (See John 20:17; Heb. 10:19-22.)

At the conclusion of Ezra's prayer, or thanksgiving, "all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground." v. 6. It is a striking scene, for the Lord was working in the hearts of His people with power, and hence it was that their very attitude expressed their hallowed reverence.2 They stood while Ezra prayed, and then, together with their responses of "Amen, Amen,"

All this was preparatory to the work of the day, which was the reading of the law, of which the next two verses give the account. "Also Jeshua, and Bani... 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" (or with an interpretation), "and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." vv. 7, 8.

It must be remembered that the people had dwelt long in Babylon, and that many of them, under the influence of their surroundings, had adopted Babylonish habits and ways, and even the Babylonish tongue. The sacred language, the language too of their fathers, had thus fallen into disuse and had in many cases been forgotten. Then there was another source of confusion. Some of the Jews "had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: and their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people." Chap. 13:23, 24. It became necessary therefore to cause the people to understand the law, to read it distinctly or with an interpretation, to give the sense, and to cause them to understand the reading. All this is most instructive, and in two ways: first, we learn that assimilation into the world leads to forgetfulness and ignorance of the Word of God; second that the true function of the teacher is to give the sense of the Scriptures, to explain what they mean, and to cause their hearers to understand their import. There will be also the application of the Word to the state and needs of the people, but even in this, as in the case before us, it will be as guided by the Holy Spirit to the suited portions.

The Word of God was "quick and powerful" in the hearts of the people; it was sharper than any two-edged sword, and pierced even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and discerned the thoughts and intents of their hearts, for they "wept, when they heard the words of the law." But "Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep." v. 9.

The feast of trumpets was indeed to be "a holy convocation," and because of its typical significance, sorrow was unsuited to its character. Hence we read, "Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob. Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery. Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day. For this was a statute for Israel, and a law of the God of Jacob." Psalm 81:1-4. They were therefore to be joyful on this day in communion with the mind of their God. But joy cannot be contained; it of necessity overflows, and hence they were to communicate it to others. "Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength." v. 10. This order is instructive- communion with the heart of God and then communion with their brethren. The first thing was to have their own hearts filled with the joy of the Lord, then for that joy to well out in blessing to the poor and needy, and thus they would find that the joy of the Lord was their strength.

"So the Levites," we are told, "stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved." The time would soon come for the expression of their sorrow (chap. 9), but now they were to rejoice according to the thoughts of the heart of God for their future blessing. Truly they had need of self-judgment and contrition, but the point is, that this holy day was not suited for these things, and the Lord would have them rise above their own state and condition, and for the moment find their joy in His joy, and in His joy would be their strength. There are many saints who will understand this; when gathered, for example, around the Lord at His table to commemorate His death, there

might be many things calling for sorrow and humiliation as to our condition, but it would be losing sight altogether of the mind of the Lord to confess our sins at such a season. It is the Lord's death we there remember and announce, not ourselves or our failures, and it is only as we have His objects before our souls in our being gathered that we enter into and have communion with His own heart. So it was on this first day of the seventh month, and this will explain the action of Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites in restraining the expression of the people's grief.

The people responded to the exhortation of their leaders, and "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." v. 12. In this way they celebrated the feast according to the mind of God, if without the trumpets. They were not in a right condition for testimony, and thus the first thing was to get themselves right by the application of the Word.

Exposition on Nehemiah, Nehemiah 4:16-23: Exposition on Nehemiah

Chapter 4 continued

The effect of Nehemiah's vigilant and energetic activity and preparation for defense was to dishearten the foe. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you," if but "for a season." The enemy heard that their plans had come to the knowledge of Nehemiah, and that God had thus frustrated their counsel; and they seem to have retreated for the moment, for the Jews were able to return all of them to the wall—every one to his work. In this way God responded to the faith of His devoted servant by baffling the adversary's designs. But Nehemiah was not ignorant of Satan's devices, and did not for a minute believe the danger was over. He knew too well his restless enmity to imagine that he had given up his designs against the Lord's people and the Lord's work; and while, therefore, the builders recommenced their labor, Nehemiah made effectual provision for defense in case of a sudden attack. His own servants, we read, he divided into two companies, the one of which builded, and the other "held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons." Then he placed the rulers behind all the house of Judah—evidently to encourage them to resistance if attacked by the foe (v. 16). Combining this with the description of the manner in which they builded—"every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded"—and with the other added details, some most interesting instruction may be gleaned.

First, and foremost, the several classes of laborers may be specified. There were some wholly devoted to the work. There were others who were entirely occupied with the weapons of warfare (v. 16). So it is in the Church of God. Some of the Lord's servants are called and specially qualified for edification. They therefore occupy themselves with souls and with the assembly, laboring to build up themselves and others on their most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, seeking to maintain the truth of the Church among the saints, and caring for the holiness of the house of God. There are others who are called to conflict, who are quick to discern the assaults of the enemy upon the truth of God, and wise in the power of the Holy Spirit to meet them with the weapons of their warfare, which are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:4, 5). The builders, the burden-bearers, and those that laded, are also distinguished (v. 17). Every one had his appointed work, and all contributed to the same end. Happy is it for the people of God, as may once more be seen when they perceive the special place for which they are qualified, and occupy it for the Lord. It is the forgetfulness of this qualified, and occupy it for the Lord. It is the forgetfulness of this truth that has in every age produced confusion in the Church, and hence too much stress cannot be laid on the importance of filling, and of being satisfied with filling, the place for which we have been divinely qualified. If burden bearers—burden bearers for others—let us not seek to be builders; and if builders, let us wait on our building. The Lord and not the servant appoints to the work and qualifies for it.

But whether builders, burden-bearers, or "those that laded," one feature characterized them all alike—"Every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon." This in itself reveals the character of the times in which they labored. They were in fact perilous times—times, as we have seen, when the power of Satan was increasingly manifested in opposition to the people of God. These times were typical of that in which Jude labored, especially when he wrote his epistle; for we find the same two things in him the sword and the trowel. He found it necessary to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints, and he also exhorted those to whom he wrote to build up themselves on their most holy faith. And this is also the character of the present day—the perilous times in which our lot is cast. We may, therefore, well learn from Nehemiah's builders, that the divine way of being prepared for the assaults of the enemy is, while we have our weapons of defense in one hand, or our swords girded on our thigh,. to be diligently occupied in building. The danger is, when controversies arise through Satan's attacks upon the truth, of forgetting the need of souls of ceasing to build, of being so occupied with the enemy as to overlook the necessity of diligent and persistent ministrations of Christ to sustain and nourish souls, and thus to enable them to repel the enemy's assaults. God's people cannot be fed, built up, with controversies—a warning word which cannot be too loudly sounded forth at the present moment. Our positive work, even when expecting and on the outlook for the enemy, is building; and the more earnestly we build, the more secure we shall be when the enemy delivers his assault. The weapons must be ready, but our work is to go on with the wall.

Then there was the trumpeter. "And he," says Nehemiah, "that sounded the trumpet was by me." v. 18. The use of the holy trumpet may be gathered from Numb. 10 It was for "the calling of the assembly, and for the journeying of the camps." Moreover, in times of war, "an alarm" was to be blown an alarm which not only assembled the people, but also came up before God, called Him in, so that they might be saved from their enemies. And it was a command that only the priests should blow with the trumpets—only those who, from their nearness had intelligence of, were in communion with, the Lord's mind. So here, he who sounded the trumpet was to be with Nehemiah; and, therefore, only to sound it at his master's bidding. It was for Nehemiah to discern the moment to sound, for the trumpeter to catch the first intimation of Nehemiah's mind and will. In like manner now, only those who are living in the enjoyment of their priestly privileges, in nearness to and in communion with the mind of Christ, know how to sound an alarm. To blow at their own will, or on their own apprehensions of danger, would only be to produce confusion, to call the builders away from their labors, and thus to do the work of the enemy. To be able to sound at the right moment, they must be with, and have their eyes upon, their Lord.

Nehemiah, in the next place, gave the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, directions concerning what they should do if they heard the sound of the trumpet (vv. 19, 20). Scattered, necessarily, in their labors, the moment the trumpet sounded they were to gather together

around Nehemiah and the trumpeter. The Lord (if we speak of the spiritual instruction was with him who had sounded the Awn!. He had given the word, and the trumpeter had blown his trumpet; and to the testimony that had gone forth the people must gather. For the moment their labors must be suspended that they might assemble around the Lord and make common cause against the enemy. It would have been unfaithfulness, if the trumpet sounded, to continue their work; for the Lord's mind for them at that moment would be defense, conflict, and not building. Some of the builders, as often happens, might feel that it was far happier work to build than to fight; but the only question for them would be, Had the trumpet sounded? If it had, it would be for them to obey the summons. This brings out another important feature. In all these arrangements, one mind governs all. Nehemiah commands, and the part of the people, whether rulers, nobles, or the rest, was simply obedience. Thus it should ever be. The Lord—by His very title of Lord—claims the subjection of all His servants to His own will as expressed in the written Word. Last, Nehemiah tells them, "Our God shall fight for us"; falling back, doubtless, in the exercise of faith, upon God's own word, to which we have alluded, in connection with the blowing of an alarm in the time of war. For if God called the people together for the defense of His cause, He would surely deliver them from the power of the foe. And with what courage should the assurance inspire us, that, if by His grace we are associated with God as against the enemy, we may confidently count upon His succor. It is a battle cry—"Our God shall fight for us"—which will at the same time encourage His servants and strike dismay into the heart of the adversary.

The chapter then concludes with three additional particulars. "So," that is, in this manner, says Nehemiah, "we labored in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared." v. 21. They were thus ever on the alert, ready for the foe, and untiring in their service. They wrought while it was day, from early morning till late at night; for, as we have seen, they had a mind to work. He also at the same time said unto the people, "Let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us, and labor on the day." v. 22. The day for labor, and the night for watchfulness. Satan loves the darkness; it is the element in which he lives and moves, even as his followers love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are, evil (Eph. 6:12; John 3:19). The servants of the Lord therefore should never cease to be watchful, but must make provision for the night as well as for the day, even as we read in the Song of Solomon of the threescore valiant men who were about the bed, "which is Solomon's.... They all hold swords, being expert in war: every man hath his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night." Chap. 3:7, 8. We learn then,, from this instruction of Nehemiah, that the place of safety was "within Jerusalem," behind the walls that. were being built, and that those who were found within should labor in the day, and keep watch during the night.

Finally, Nehemiah says, "So neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing." v. 23. This statement, it will be observed, is not made concerning all the people, only concerning Nehemiah, his brethren, and his personal following—servants, and men of the guard. He thus set a blessed example, in the circle of his own responsibility, of personal devotedness. He knew how to refuse himself, his own ease and comfort, in the Lord's service, to endure hardness as a good soldier (2 Tim. 2:3). But he is careful to inform us that they put off their clothes to wash themselves; for those who are engaged in the Lord's work must not neglect personal defilements which would grieve the Holy Spirit, limit His power, and thus mar their usefulness.

True, it is the Lord's work—His blessed work in grace—to wash His people's feet; but self judgment is the process through which He leads us, through the Spirit, to effect our cleansing; and for this purpose we must "put off our clothes," everything that might conceal our condition from ourselves, that there

may be no hindrance to the washing of water by the Word.

Exposition on Nehemiah, Nehemiah 4:1-15: Exposition on Nehemiah

Chapter 4

In chapter 3 we have a beautiful presentation of the energy of the Spirit of God in the devoted service of His people. But whenever the people of God are active, Satan is aroused, and he seeks by every means in his power to raise up hindrances and obstacles. This is illustrated once more in the opening verses of this chapter, which give us the third form of his opposition to the work of God's builders. In chapter 2:10, the enemy was "grieved... exceedingly." Then he tried mockery and scorn (2:19), and now he assumes the weapons of anger and indignation. "It came to pass," we read, "that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. 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 Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall." vv. 1-3. The language both of Sanballat and Tobiah was inconsistent with their feelings. It is in verse 1 that we find their real state of mind. Wrath and indignation it was that possessed their souls, for they knew full well the significance of the activity of the children of Israel. But when they spoke they concealed their anger with affected contempt. If however the "feeble Jews" were working in vain, if the wall they were building

were of such a contemptible character, wherefore the anger of Sanballat and Tobiah? Happy was it for the builders that their leader was on the watch, and, armed at every point against the devices of Satan, knew how to use the shield wherewith to quench his fiery darts. For what was Nehemiah's resource in the presence of this new form of hostility?

He said, "Hear, 0 our God; for we are despised." v. 4. He simply turned to God in the assurance that He cared for His people, that He would be their defense and their shield, engaged as they were in His own service. And it is ever blessed when we can take all the enemy's revilings to, and leave them with, God. In the energy and impatience of nature, we are too apt to attempt to meet the foe in our own strength, and thus we often rush into the conflict only to encounter defeat and disaster. But faith turns the eye upward and commits all to the Lord. Hezekiah furnishes us with a beautiful illustration of this when he went up into the house of the Lord and spread before Him the letter which he had received from Rabshakeh, who commanded the army of Sennacherib. In like manner Nehemiah cried, "Hear, O our God." And mark his plea—"for we are despised." God's people are precious in His sight, and to despise them is to despise Him. Nehemiah had entered into this, and thus made his appeal to the heart of God. Having cast himself in this way upon God, and placed himself and the people (for he fully identifies himself with them) under His protection, he gathers strength to pray against the enemy. "Turn," he says, "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." vv. 4, 5. It may surprise the superficial reader that such a prayer could be offered. Two things should be remembered: first, the dispensation under which the people were; and second, that the enemies of Israel were the enemies of God. Sanballat and Tobiah were deliberately setting themselves in opposition to the work of the Spirit of God. And all may learn from this prayer, as Saul afterward had to learn in another way, what a solemn thing it is to persecute God's people and to hinder His work. Thus the ground on which Nehemiah urges his petition is:

"They have provoked Thee to anger before the builders." The cause of these despised children of the captivity was the cause of God; and it was in this confidence that Nehemiah found, as all believers who are in fellowship with the mind of God in their labors may find, encouragement to invoke His aid as against their foes.

But if Nehemiah prayed (as we shall see again), it did not interfere with his or the people's labors; we might rather say that his perseverance in his work sprang from his prayers. We say his prayers, for these are his individual cries to God, and his cries in secret to God. We are permitted to view the inner life of this devoted servant, as well as his public labors. No ear but God's heard these supplications, though they are recorded to teach us that the secret of all true activity, as well as of courage in the presence of danger, is realized dependence on the Lord. Thus, after Nehemiah records his prayer, he adds: "So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work." v. 6. This is a blessed record, and one which testifies to the energy of the Spirit of God acting through Nehemiah upon the people, and producing unanimity and perseverance. For when it says, "The people had a mind to work," it means that they had God's mind. Sometimes unanimity may be seen and the fact gloried in irrespective of the consideration whether it is according to the mind of God. To be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment (1 Cor. 1:10), when the result of divine power, ensures the successful accomplishment of any service to which God calls His people, because with His Spirit ungrieved He is able to work without let or hindrance in their midst.

This spectacle of united perseverance in the work of God excited the foe to more determined opposition. Having tried many weapons without success to deter the people from building the wall, he now produces another. "It came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, 'and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, and conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it." vv. 7, 8.

Before, there were but a few individuals, but now there are numbers. Satan finding that Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem could not succeed by themselves, draws others to their help—the Arabians, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites—these last being entirely new allies. In fact, he collects an army, as force is the weapon he is now about to try. But what was it that aroused the enemy anew to attempt to hinder the work? It was the report they had heard, that "the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped." It was now evident that the children of the captivity were in earnest, and that they, under the leadership of Nehemiah, were determined to shut out evil by erecting the wall and stopping the breaches. This never suits Satan, whose desire ever is to break down all distinction between the people of God and the world, and hence it was that he marshaled his forces in order to prevent "these feeble Jews" from accomplishing their purpose.

And what had the children of Israel to meet this array of power on the part of the adversary? They had a leader whose confidence was in God, and who had learned the lesson Elisha taught his servant when the king of Syria had sent an army to take him; namely, that "they that be with us are more than they that be with them." Nothing daunted, therefore, by the increasing numbers and rage of the enemy, he says, "Nevertheless we made our prayer unto God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them." He thus combined dependence on God, in whom alone he knew his strength and defense to be, with unceasing vigilance against the "roaring lion." These are the two invisible weapons which God puts into the hands of His people in the presence of the enemy—weapons which suffice to defeat his most powerful assaults. Hence the Lord, in the prospect of the advancing power of Satan against His disciples, said, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." Matt. 26:41. The Apostle likewise writes, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance," etc. (Eph. 6:18), knowing that unless watchfulness were maintained Satan would soon decoy the soul into forgetfulness and sloth. Nehemiah, therefore, was divinely instructed in his means of defense, which, indeed, placed a rampart between him and his foes, against which, if they dashed, it would be only to encounter certain destruction. And observe that the watchfulness (day and night) was as unceasing as the prayer. In this sense there is no rest for the Christian. Having done all, he is still to stand; for as the enemy is unresting in his attacks, the believer must be unceasing in the use of his means of defense.

But a new source of danger is now discovered. Without were fightings, and now, alas! within were fears. "And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall." v. 10. As long as "the people had a mind to work," the danger from without, met as it was by watchfulness and prayer, mattered but little; but the difficulty was great when the people themselves became fainthearted and weary. The cause of Judah's despondency was twofold. First, "The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed." Judah had forgotten that the Lord was the strength of His people, and that if He places a burden of service upon the shoulders of any of His people, He gives also the needful strength for its execution. Second, they said that on account of the quantity of rubbish it was impossible to build the wall. So have many said since Judah's day. The corruptions in the Church have been so many—so much "rubbish" has been imported on every side—that, despairing of carrying out separation from evil according to the Word of God, souls have often been betrayed into acceptance of the very things they deplore. It is impossible, they say, to conform themselves now to the Word of God, to restore the authority of the Scriptures over the conduct and activities of the Church, to give the place of pre-eminence to the Lord in the midst of His gathered people, to draw the line of distinction between those who are His and those who are not; and we must, therefore, accept things as they are. Granted that there is much rubbish, it is vet clear that the Word of God never abates its claims upon His people; and 2 Timothy teaches most distinctly that the responsibility of building the wall is as binding upon the saints when the house of God is in ruins, as was that of maintaining the wall when His house was in order. The fact was, the effect of the display of the enemy's power, and the prospect of incessant warfare had discouraged the heart of Judah; and he sought to find a justification for his state of soul in the condition of the burden bearers, and in the obstacles to his work. Many of us can understand this; for to labor under constant discouragements and in the presence of active enemies is calculated to try the spirit and to tempt us to abandon our service, especially when we have ceased to derive our strength and our motives to perseverance from communion with the mind of the Lord.

Two other dangers are indicated in verses 11 and 12. The adversaries sought to keep the builders in a continual state of alarm by threatening a sudden onslaught, and thus to wear them out, as they had partially done in the case of Judah, by the strain of continual apprehension. The Jews, moreover, that "dwelt by them," those, that is, who were not inhabitants of Jerusalem, but were scattered through the land in the vicinity of their foes, these came, and assured the builders repeatedly—"ten times"—that danger was really impending, that their adversaries

would certainly execute their threats. To sight, therefore, there was little, if anything, to encourage; but perils of every kind were hemming them in, threatening both the continuation of their work, and even their own lives.

If, however, the enemy was unwearying in his assaults, Nehemiah was not less untiring in his watchfulness and defense; and the rest of the chapter (vv. 13-23) gives us a most interesting and detailed account of the measures he adopted for the security of the people, for the progress of the work, and of the manner in which they builded. In the first place, he arranged for defense by setting "in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places,... the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows." These were both duly ordered and fully armed, for when Satan is in question we are powerless unless we are in the right place and equipped with divine weapons. (Compare Eph. 6:10-17.) Thereupon Nehemiah inspirited the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people with words of exhortation. He said, "Be not 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." v. 14. The frequency of the exhortation in the Scriptures, not to be afraid, addressed to God's people, shows how prone we are to yield to fear in the conflicts we are called upon to wage. It is both the first symptom of want of confidence in God, and the sure precursor of defeat if fear continues to possess our souls. Hence, when Israel went forth to battle in olden days, the proclamation had to be made, as in the case of Gideon's army, "What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart." Deut. 20:8. While, however, Nehemiah urged them not to fear, he supplied the antidote; "Remember the Lord," he says, "which is great and terrible." For he knew that if they but once apprehended the character and presence of God, if they brought Him in, by the exercise of faith, and measured the foe by what He was, they would be filled with courage, and be able to say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" He sought in this way to nerve their arm for the battle; and thus he continued, "and fight for your brethren," etc. If the battle was the Lord's, it was yet for all that was dearest to them in this world that they were to fight.

Nehemiah: Labour and Conflict, Nehemiah 13:4-31

It is impossible now to determine the chronological place of the occurrences of this chapter. We are only told that “before this” Eliashib was allied unto Tobiah, and had been on great terms of intimacy with him; and that during this time Nehemiah was not at Jerusalem (Neh. 13:6). “Before this” would mean before the separation from the mixed multitude (Neh. 13:3), and hence the probability is that the dedication of the wall had been delayed through the absence of the governor; and that, if this were so, the events described here took place prior to the services in connection with the dedication of the wall. This however is of no consequence, for, as before intimated, what we have to seek is the moral and not the historical order. Interpreting the connection thus there is no difficulty; for what was the object of Nehemiah’s mission to Jerusalem? It was to build the walls of the holy city (Neh. 3 and 6), and by the good hand of God upon him he was enabled to complete the work to which he had been called. The wall had been erected, and he and the people had celebrated the event with great joy, and under the influence of that day they had set the house of God in order, and recognized that they were a people set apart to Jehovah.

And what was the next thing? FAILURE — failure in everything which they had undertaken to do, and to which they had bound themselves, under the penalty of a curse, by a solemn covenant. (See chapter 10.) The lesson of Nehemiah’s mission is therefore the lesson of every dispensation; that is to say, that whatever God entrusts to man under responsibility ends in failure. Nay, there is more than this, for we learn that failure is brought in by man at the very moment of God’s grace in blessing. It is not only that each successive dispensation ends, but it also begins with failure. Adam, for example, disobeyed as soon as he was set in the place of headship and blessing; Noah, in like manner, sinned as soon as he could gather the fruit of his first vineyard upon the new earth; Israel apostatized before even the tables of the law reached the camp; and David incurred blood-guiltiness soon after the establishment of the kingdom. Nor is it otherwise in the history of the Church. In the end of Acts 4 we see the perfect answer to the Lord’s prayer,” that they all may be one” (John 17:21), for “the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul” (Neh. 13:32); and then in Acts 5 we have the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, and in Acts 6 the murmuring of one class of disciples against another. So also with the mission of individuals. As an instance take the case of the Apostle Paul. Long before he had finished his course he saw the outward failure of the Church, and “all they which are in Asia” had “turned away” from him (2 Tim. 1:15). These examples will explain the significant moral order of Nehemiah’s narrative. Scarcely had the echoes of Jerusalem’s joy, in being surrounded once more by her wall of separation (Neh. 12:43), died away, before all the evils which had hitherto afflicted the people, and which had been the cause of their long years of banishment, reappeared. And the book closes with the account of Nehemiah’s conflict with the transgressors in Israel, and of his strenuous efforts to maintain the supremacy of Jehovah in the holy city.

The first thing mentioned is the sin of Eliashib. Eliashib was the grandson of Jeshua, who had returned with Zerubbabel. He filled the office of the priest, had “the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God,” and yet, in defiance of the Word of God, was allied unto Tobiah the Ammonite, and had even “prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat-offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil”— the portion for the Levites—and this chamber was “in the courts of the house of God” (Neh. 13:5,7). This was corruption in the head and representative of the people before God, and with such an example, what wonder if the people followed in his guilty steps? It is a terrible instance of the hardening effect of familiarity with sacred things when the heart is not upright before God. Eliashib was constantly engaged in the work of his high-priestly office in the holy places, and yet had become blunted and indifferent to the character of the God before whom he appeared, as well as to the holiness of His house. His office in his eyes was an office, and nothing more; and hence he used it for his own purposes mid for the assistance of his friends, a pattern that has, alas! been frequently reproduced even in the Church of God.

All this time Nehemiah, as he informs us, was not at Jerusalem. He had paid a visit to the king (Neh. 13:6), but, on his return, was made acquainted with the evil Eliashib had perpetrated in connection with Tobiah; and he says, “it grieved me sore” (Neh. 13:8). There are those who can understand the grief of this devoted man. It was a grief according to God; for it sprang from a sense of the dishonor done to the Lord’s name. It was akin to that of Jeremiah when he cried, “O that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” or again to that of the apostle when he poured forth his earnest admonitions, entreaties, and remonstrances to his Galatian converts. Would that there were more filled with like zeal for the house of God! Nor was it grief only that Nehemiah felt, but it was grief that led him to purge this chamber of the temple from its pollutions. He cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah, and says, “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” (Neh. 13:8-9). He thus restored the chamber, having purified it, to its proper use.

In connection with this another discovery was made. “I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given them: for the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field” (Neh. 13:10). Together with the admission of the enemy into the holy places of the temple, the ministers of God had been neglected. The Levites and singers had been wholly set apart for the sacred services of the house, and the burden of their maintenance, by divine appointment, fell upon, and had been acknowledged by, the people. But as soon as they lost, through the influence of Eliashib, all sense of the holiness of the house, they forgot their responsibilities; and the servants of the Lord in His house were compelled to have recourse to the ordinary means of support—“they fled every man to his field.” The same thing is often seen in the Church. In seasons of devotedness, wrought upon by the Spirit of God, there are those who will give up all for the work of proclaiming the gospel or ministering the Word; and when the saints are walking with God they will welcome such, and “have fellowship with them,” rejoicing that the Lord is sending forth more laborers into His harvest, and to care for the souls of His people. But whenever decline sets in, and saints become worldly, laborers are forgotten; so that those who have not learned the lesson of dependence on God alone, that He is all-sufficient for their needs, are compelled to flee to their fields for support. This difference, however, must be marked. There is no obligation now, as there was with the Jew, to support the Levites, but it is a privilege to do so; and whenever it is done as unto the Lord, the things offered, as they were to Paul, are “an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God” (Phil. 4:18). Nehemiah proceeded at once to rectify also this abuse. He contended with the rulers, and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” Then he gathered the Levites and singers together, and once more set them in their place. He thus went down to the root of the evil—forsaking the house of God (compare Heb. 10:25)—and at the same time dealt with those—the rulers—who were responsible for the neglect; for if they were careless, the people would soon imitate their example. In fact, it was the cropping up of the evil that has afflicted the people of God in every age—minding their own things instead of being occupied with the Lord, His interests and claims.

The influence of the energetic action of Nehemiah was instantly felt; for we read, “Then brought all Judah the tithe of the corn, and the new wine, and the oil into the treasuries” (Neh. 13:12). The people had a heart, and their affections towards the house of God and His servants were ready to flow out as soon as Nehemiah led the way. It is another instance that the outward state of the people of God depends almost wholly upon the character of their leaders. If these are earnest and devoted, so will be also the people; while if those who take the lead are careless and worldly, these characteristics will also be displayed by the people. It is so now in different assemblies. Whatever those are who have places of prominence, so are the saints corporately. The leaders impress their own character upon the meeting. There may be individuals in the assembly of entirely another sort, but we speak of meetings as a whole. All this does but show out the solemn responsibility resting upon “the rulers,” and will explain, at the same time, the character of the addresses to the angels of the seven churches; for the angels are but the collective responsibility, whether in one, two, or more, of the several assemblies, and hence their state is the state of all, and they are dealt with as responsible for it.

To provide against the recurrence of the evil, Nehemiah “made treasurers over the treasuries” (Neh. 13:13), the ground of his selection being that “they were counted faithful; and their office was to distribute unto their brethren.” Upright himself before God, he was uninfluenced by any personal considerations; and, governed by the single eye, he had respect only to suitability for the post. Fidelity was the thing needed, as the office was one of trust, requiring faithfulness towards God and also towards their brethren; and hence he sought only such as possessed the necessary qualification. The very composition, moreover, of the treasurers—a priest, a scribe, a Levite, and another —shows how careful he also was in “providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (2 Cor. 8:21).

This accomplished, Nehemiah turns to God with the prayer, “Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices thereof” (Neh. 13:14). It has often been pointed out that Nehemiah in his prayers was too much occupied with himself and his own good deeds. We do not say that it might not have been so; but they are capable of another interpretation. He was almost alone in the midst of prevailing corruption, and it was only in God that he found his strength and encouragement; and thus, in the midst of all his difficulties, we find continually these ejaculatory petitions. At any rate, it is clear that he looked for no recompense from man, and that he was content to leave himself and the recognition of his doings in the hands of God, assured, as he was, that it was God’s work in which he was engaged, and counting upon Him alone for the recompense.

Forsaking the house of God was not the only evil Nehemiah had to contend with. The next was the violation of the sabbath. “In those days,” he says, “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” (Neh. 13:15). They were also selling victuals, and bought fish and ware of the men of Tire on the sabbath (Neh. 13:16). Having lost all sense of the claims of God as to His house, it was but a natural consequence that they should also neglect the sanctity of the seventh day, the observance of which from redemption out of Egypt (Ex. 16; Deut. 5:14-15) and onwards, had been enjoined by God in connection with every covenant into which He had been pleased to enter with His people Israel. The profanation therefore of the sabbath was the sign that they had gone far in backsliding, that indeed they were verging upon apostasy; for they were sinning, in this respect, against both light and knowledge. Nehemiah, in his zeal for the Lord, was aroused, and he “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” (Neh. 13:17-18). It will be observed that as the rulers were in question in regard to forsaking the house of God, so the nobles are the head and front of the offense in respect of the sabbath. In both cases the fount of the evil was in those who ought to have been examples to the people. It is ever so in times of general declension, inasmuch as it is only the leaders who can draw the mass after them into sin. But this very fact rendered the tusk of Nehemiah all the more arduous. Single-handed he had to contend with those on whom he had a right to count to sustain his authority and influence. Truly he was a faithful man, and because he was such God was with him in his conflict with the transgressors in Israel. Having convicted them that had sinned before all (see 1 Tim. 5:20), he used his authority as governor to prevent a recurrence of the evil. First, he commanded that the gates of Jerusalem should be shut before dark on the eve of the sabbath, and that they should be kept closed until the sabbath was over. It shows how few were to be depended upon for this service, in that he stationed some of his own servants at the gates to see to it, that “there should be no burden brought in on the sabbath-day” (Neh. 13:19). In addition, he gave his own unremitting attention to the matter; and thus when the Tyrian merchants and vendors lodged without Jerusalem once or twice—their very presence being a temptation to the people—he testified against them, and threatened to lay hands on them, and in this way they were driven off. Finally, he “commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath-day” (Neh. 13:22). It is a beautiful picture of one devoted man seeking with all his might to stem the rushing tide of evil. To human eyes it might seem a hopeless struggle, and even, as to outward results, a failure. But it was God’s battle that Nehemiah was fighting, and he knew it, and if but faithful to Him there could never be defeat. God is the appraiser of the conflict, and He counts as victory what human eyes regard as disaster. (See Isa. 49:4-6.) Nehemiah had in measure learned this lesson, and thus he turns again to God with the prayer,

“Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Thy mercy.” He looks not to man, but to God; and while he desires to be remembered for “this also,” yet, in his true humility, conscious of all his own weakness and failure, he does but pray to be spared according to the “greatness” of God’s mercy. Blessed state of soul is it when the servant is made to feel that, whatever his service, he has nothing to rest upon but the mercy of God On that foundation—for Christ Himself is its channel and expression—he can repose, whatever his trials and conflicts, in perfect peace and security.

There was yet another trial. “In those days also,” he says, “saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: and their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews’ language, but according to the language of each people” (Neh. 13:23-24). This was the evil that had so deeply afflicted the heart of Ezra (chap. 9:1-3), and which he earnestly sought to eradicate; but it had started up again, and confronted Nehemiah also all through his labors (Neh. 9:2; 10:30) with its sad and open testimony to the state of the people. For what did it declare? That Israel was abandoning the ground of separation unto God, and breaking down the holy wall of enclosure—“the middle wall of partition”— by which He had shut them off from all the peoples that were upon the face of the earth. It was, in truth, no less than a denial that they were God’s chosen nation—a holy people to the Lord; and it was thus a surrender of all the privileges, blessings, and hopes of their calling. It was no wonder therefore that Nehemiah was filled with such holy indignation that he “contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, 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 reminded them, moreover, of the sad example of Solomon, that, “though there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: even him did outlandish women cause to sin. Shall we then,” he inquired, “hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?” (Neh. 13:25-27).

It must have been indeed a bitter trial to the heart of Nehemiah. It was the account of the great reproach and affliction of the remnant in the province, and of the wall in Jerusalem being broken down, as well as of the gates being burned with fire (Neh. 1:3), that had been used to stir up the desire in his soul to remedy these evils. The desire of his heart was granted, and he had gone to Jerusalem, and labored there for years, and at length, through the goodness of God, saw his desire accomplished. But now, together with the close of his labors, he has to mourn over the persistent refusal of the people to remain in holy security within the wall of separation. Having their treasure in the world, their hearts were there also, and they thus continually turned their backs upon all the blessings of the holy place in which they had been set. Still Nehemiah was undaunted, and with unwearied energy he persevered in his labors for the good of his people, seeking only, for the glory of God, to spend and be spent in their service. First, he “chased” from him one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, who was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite.

Eliashib himself, as we have seen, was “allied unto Tobiah,” so that he and his family were linked up with the two active enemies of Israel. Here then, in the high priest’s family, was the fount of corruption, from which flowed out the dark and bitter streams of sin through the people. To drive the sinner away was all that Nehemiah himself could accomplish; but he had another resource, of which he availed himself—he committed the matter to God. “Remember them, O my God,” he cries, “because they have defiled the priesthood” (Lev. 21), “and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites” (Mal. 2:4-7). It might seem strange that Nehemiah, armed as he was with authority as the governor, proceeded no further with the punishment of this guilty priest. The fact is, it is impossible, in the way of discipline, to go beyond the moral state of the people. To do so would be only to play into the hands of the enemy; and on this account many a godly man has to remain inactive in the presence of patent and flagrant departures from the Word of God, and to content himself, like Nehemiah, with crying to the Lord against the offenders. Where there is no conscience about the sin, the Lord alone can deal with the offender, though it may be often necessary, as in the case before us, to “chase” away the sinner. But in the midst of all the confusion, it is a blessed resource to be able to commit all to the Lord, who, in His own time, will vindicate the name which we may have dishonored.

Nehemiah nevertheless continued his work of reformation. He says, “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 firstfruits.” For the moment all is ordered according to God, and in this way Nehemiah becomes a shadow, if not a distinct type, of Him who will “sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and He shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness” (Mal. 3:3).

Thus end the recorded labors of Nehemiah. He had fully identified himself with the interests of the Lord and with Israel, and he had persevered in his labors amid opposition and reproach; and now that the close had come he is content to leave all results in the hands of God. Hence, looking away from his work and from himself, he cries, “Remember me, O my God, for good.” This prayer has already been answered; for it is God who has caused this account of Nehemiah’s labors to be preserved, and He will answer it yet more abundantly, for the time will come when He will publicly acknowledge Nehemiah’s faithful service, according to His own perfect estimate of his work. For while it is true, and ever to be remembered, that grace alone produces the energy and perseverance of service in the hearts of any, it is also true that the same grace reckons the fruits of labor to those in whose hearts they have been produced. God is the source of all; He calls and qualifies His servants; He sustains and directs them in their labors, and yet He says, “Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.” To Him alone be all the praise!

Courtesy of BibleTruthPublishers.com. Most likely this text has not been proofread. Any suggestions for spelling or punctuation corrections would be warmly received. Please email them to: BTPmail@bibletruthpublishers.com.

Nehemiah: Labour and Conflict, Nehemiah 12-13:1-3

This chapter is divided into two parts: the first, Nehemiah 12:1-26, dealing with genealogical matters; the second, Nehemiah 12:27 to 13:3, containing the account of the dedication of the wall, together with certain reformations that seem either to have been connected with or to have followed upon it.

The chapter commences with the names of the priests and Levites that went up with Zerubbabel and Jeshua; that is, (the reader will remember) those who went up in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia. (See Ezra 1-2.) The names only of “the chief of the priests, and of their brethren,” in the days of Jeshua, are given. Next we find the chief of the Levites, with Mattaniah, who was over the thanksgiving, he and his

brethren; also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brethren who were over against them in their watches (Neh. 12:8- 9).

It is worthy of note, in passing, what a prominent place praise and thanksgiving occupied in the Jewish ritual. The Psalms abundantly testify to this—many of which are filled with notes of adoration, and sonic commencing and closing with Hallelujah—"Praise ye the Lord" (See Psa. 148-150.) The believer is enjoined in everything to give thanks; and yet it is a question whether praise (which can only be known in its full and blessed character in redemption) marks the assemblies of the saints as distinctly as it should. Not that it is to be supposed, even for a moment, that the notes of praise can be raised by any sense of obligation: they can only indeed spring from hearts made "merry" by the enjoyment of redeeming love in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Nehemiah 12:12-21 the names of the chief of the fathers (priests) in the days of Joiakim are recorded. Joiakim was the son of Jeshua (Neh. 12:10). Then in verse 22, we have the statement that "the Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan, and Jaddua, were recorded chief of the fathers: also the priests, to the reign of Darius the Persian." Comparing this with verses 10-11, we find that this goes five generations down from Jeshua; that, in other words, the above names are the high-priestly line of descent to the fifth generation from Jeshua. "The sons of Levi, the chief of the fathers, were written in the book of the chronicles, even until the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib"; that is, only so far as the great grandson of Jeshua. Then the offices of some of the Levites are specified; namely, to praise and to give thanks, according to the commandment of David, the man of God, ward over against ward, others being "porters keeping the ward at the thresholds of the gates" (Neh. 12:24-25). The names of some of these correspond with some mentioned in verses 8-9, the reason of this being given in the next verse: "These were in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor, and of Ezra the priest, the scribe." It would seem as if God had a special delight in those who were occupied in the service of His house in this time of sorrow, when it required more faith and more spiritual energy to be devoted to the interests of His people. He has caused these names to be recorded—recorded, no doubt, mainly for Israel, yet containing lessons for us whose lot is cast in similar times. True that there was failure, very sad failure, with some here named, but in the eye of God, while He is never insensible to the failure of His people, they were robed with the beauty which He in His own grace had put upon them; and in the preservation of their names, He would remember nothing but the fact of their service amidst His people in this sorrowful period of their low estate.

Passing now to the second part of the chapter, we have the dedication of the wall. From the place it occupies, it will be at once seen that the subjects of the latter part of the book are given in their moral rather than in their historical connection. It has already been pointed out that from Nehemiah 7 onwards to Nehemiah 12:31, Nehemiah, if he is the writer, no longer describes his own actions. In this portion it is "we" or "they," not "I." It might seem therefore that the dedication of the wall belongs historically to the first section of the book—to Nehemiah 6, wherein we find the account of the completion of the building of the wall. But when the order of the intervening chapters is considered—the restoration of the authority of the law, the confession of the sins of the people, and of their fathers, the covenant made to walk according to the law, and to make provision for the services of the temple; the distribution of the people in Jerusalem and around, the ordering of all the affairs of the house of God under priests and Levites, according to the commandment of David the man of God—it will be perceived that morally it is inserted in its only fitting place. Taking all these things together indeed, we have the pattern of all divine reformation. The commencement was made with the people themselves; then they proceeded to God's house, and finally to the walls of the city. They worked from within to without; thus, beginning from themselves, they worked outward to the circumference of their responsibility. And such is ever the true method, even as Paul writes, "Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2). We shall find this order also illustrated in the procedure connected with the dedication itself.

First of all, the Levites were sought "out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps." The "sons of the singers" were also collected from their different places of abode (for they "had builded them villages round about Jerusalem") to aid in the observances of this eventful day (Neh. 12:27-29). Next we read, "And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates and the wall" (Neh. 12:30). Here again is the order (and it is most instructive) to which reference has been made; and we may also learn that unless we have "purified" ourselves, it is vain for us to attempt to "purify" others. This truth is everywhere affirmed in Scripture. For example, it would be impossible for any whose own feet were not washed (John 13) to wash the feet of their fellow-believers; and the Lord Himself taught, that before we could take the mote out of our brother's eye, the beam must be taken out of our own eye. It is exceedingly interesting therefore to observe that the priests and Levites purified themselves as a necessary preparation for purifying the people, the gates, and the wall. (See also 2 Chron. 29:5; 35:6.)

The means of purification must be gathered from other scriptures. In the wilderness the priests had to wash their hands and feet at the laver every time they went in to accomplish their service (Ex. 30:17-21), and in the ashes of the red heifer provision was made for all kinds of defilement that might be contracted in their daily life and walk by the people (Num. 19). Now, as already indicated, a provision of another and more efficacious sort has been made. "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). When therefore, through carelessness, or through the allowance of the flesh, we fall into sin, and become defiled, He in His love and mercy intercedes with the Father for us on the ground of what He is as the Righteous One, and of His perfect propitiation; and in answer to His advocacy the Spirit of God works, through the Word, in the conscience of the defiled believer, produces self-judgment and contrition, and leads to confession, whereon God is faithful and just to forgive the sin, and to cleanse from all unrighteousness. Thus the believer is "purified," restored to communion, and so divinely qualified to be sent forth in service to others. It cannot be too earnestly pressed, that in order to be used in any way we must ourselves be "purified" from defilements.

This then was the first thing attended to on this day of the dedication of the wall. In the next place, two companies were arranged by Nehemiah (the reader will remark his reappearance) to make, as it would seem, the circuit of the walls. The first was composed of Hoshaiah, half the princes of Judah, together with certain whose names are given (Neh. 12:32-34), and certain of the priests' sons with trumpets. Of the last Zechariah (whose descent is traced back to Asaph) was the chief; for he and his brethren had charge of the "musical instruments of David the man of God." (See 1 Chron. 15:16-17; 25:6.) Ezra, the scribe, was the leader of this company; he was "before them." The composition of the other company is not given with such detail. Nehemiah says, "The other company of them that gave thanks went over against them [that is, we judge, on the opposite wall to the other company], and I after them, and the half of the people upon the wall, from beyond the tower of the furnaces even unto the broad wall." And then, after describing the line of the procession, he says, "They stood still in the prison gate." It appears as if the two companies, starting at different points, proceeded to make the circuit of the walls until they met, as Nehemiah, after

giving the route of each of the companies, says, “So stood the two companies of them that gave thanks in the house of God, and I, and the half of the rulers with me: and the priests; Eliakim, Masseiah,” and so forth, “with trumpets” (Neh. 12:40-42). If this were so, the service of the day took place after the procession was ended, as the statement follows: “And the singers sang loud, with Jezrahiah their overseer. Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced; for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off” (Neh. 12:42-43).

Examining a little the details given, there were, we find, those who gave thanks, those who had trumpets, and those who sang; besides this, sacrifices were offered, and all rejoiced. Thanksgivings would seem to have been most prominent, and this is easily understood when it is remembered what the completion of the building of the wall meant for this poor remnant. Truly it was in “troublous times” that it had been built, and, as we have seen, amid opposition and difficulties of every sort, inspired as their enemies had been by the malice of Satan. But encouraged by the indomitable energy of their leader, they had persevered, and now their work was completed; the walls of the city were once more raised for the security of those who dwelt within, and for the exclusion of evil as displayed in their enemies round about. Thanksgiving was therefore but the natural and appropriate feeling on this day of dedication. Observe also that there were trumpets (Neh. 12:35,41). These were carried by the priests; for they alone, as those who had access into the immediate presence of God, and might be thus in communion with His mind, had the privilege of raising the notes of testimony through the sacred trumpets (Num. 10). This day of dedication was for God; but whenever the claims of God are responded to in the energy of the Holy Spirit, testimony for Him also proceeds from His people. For example, when the saints gather together on the first day of the week to break bread (Acts 20), it is in response to His desire who said, “This do in remembrance of me.” It is for Him therefore they gather, for Him—without a thought of others. And yet as often as they eat the bread and drink the cup they announce the Lord’s death “until He come”; that is, though they gather in remembrance of the Lord, and, while thus occupied, their hearts are led forth in thanksgiving and adoration, they yet, by the very thing in which they are engaged, proclaim to all the Lord’s death. The trumpets are in this way associated with their notes of praise. There were also musical instruments and singing. The singers indeed “sang loud,” or, as it is in the margin, made their voice to be heard.

They thus, by the musical instruments and their songs, expressed their joy before the Lord. The character of this is given in the next verse in connection with the sacrifices; for they remembered again on this festival that the only ground on which they could stand before God, though it were to thank and praise His holy name, was the efficacy of the sacrifice. Joy could therefore flow out, and it was joy of no ordinary kind; for “God had made them rejoice with great joy.” Nothing could be more blessed. Our poor hearts long for joy, and are ever tempted to seek it from human sources, only to find that it is both unsatisfying and evanescent. Hence the apostle writes, “Be not drunk with wine” (type of the joys of earth), “wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:18-19). Such was the joy on this day of the children of Israel; for it had its source in God, and He it was who had filled their hearts with thanksgivings and their lips with praise. They had, we might say, sown in tears, and now they were reaping with joy.

Mark also that all classes of the people participated in it. It is expressly said, “The wives also and the children rejoiced.” This was precious to the heart of God; for the wives and children were numbered amongst His people (compare Eph. 5; 6), and why should they be excluded from the gladness of this day? They had been assembled also with the congregation at the reading of the law (Neh. 8); and indeed it is a characteristic both of this book and in Ezra (see Ezra 10), that the women and children were present in all the great assemblies of the people. The effect of their rejoicing was great; for we read that “the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off” (Neh. 12:43). It went forth into the midst of their enemies as a mighty testimony to Him, by whose grace they had been rescued from Babylon, and by whose protection and succor they had now been permitted to re-erect the walls of the holy city. They were proving anew that the joy of the Lord was their strength both for praise and for testimony. And it is added that “Judah rejoiced for the priests, and for the Levites that waited” (or stood), that stood in their places of service in the temple. It was joy to Judah to behold the services of the house of God restored, and the priests and Levites engaged in the work of their office.

In connection with the ceremonies of the dedication some necessary things were attended to in the house of God: it says, “At that time”— not perhaps on the same day, but “at that time”—the time following upon the dedication of the wall. What they did was to appoint some “over the chambers for the treasures, for the offerings, for the first-fruits, and for the tithes, to gather into them, out of the fields of the cities, the portions of the law for the priests and Levites: for Judah rejoiced for the priests and for the Levites that waited” (Neh. 12:44). There was evidently a continual tendency to neglect the concerns of the house of God, and together with this the priests and the Levites were overlooked. It was so on the first return of the captives (Hag. 1), and it was so in every time of declension, as it has been also in every age of the Church. Ceasing to care for the house of Jehovah, the maintenance of the priests and Levites enjoined by the law was not forthcoming; for all were minding their own things, and not the things of the Lord. But when their hearts were touched by the goodness of God in permitting them to complete the wall, they at once remembered the ministers of their God, and again (see Neh. 10:37-39) made provision for them. This is how God works in the low estate of His people. Granting them a revival, it may be under the power of some special truth, they, acted upon by the new impulse they have thus received, proceed to correct by the application of the Word the abuses that have sprung up on every hand. So it was in this case; and hence we find that the singers and the porters were also arranged, who “kept the ward of their God, and the ward of the purification, according to the commandment of David, and of Solomon his son. For in the days of David and Asaph, of old, there were chief of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving unto God” (Neh. 12:45-46). They recall how it was in the beginning of the temple services, and their desire now was to be conformed to the original model. This is an abiding principle; for it is only—by testing everything by what was at the beginning that we can discover the extent of our departure, and it is only by going back to it that we can be in harmony with the mind of God.

Moreover, we read, “And all Israel, in the days of Zerubbabel, and in the days of Nehemiah, gave the portions of the singers and the porters, every day his portion; and they sanctified the holy things unto the Levites; and the Levites sanctified them unto the children of Aaron.” This can hardly be more than a general statement (see chaps. 10:37-39; 13:10) to the effect that there were times, during the periods named, when all Israel owned and met their obligations to these servants of the house of their God. Their failure is not here recorded; that has to be gleaned from the other parts of the book. Here it is only remembered that all Israel had cared for God’s ministers of His sanctuary.

Lastly, we are told that “on that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people”; and that when they found therein that “the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God forever” (Deut. 23:3-4), “they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude” (Neh. 13:1-3). Again and again they had thus separated themselves (Ezra 10; Nehemiah 9:2), and again and again did “the

holy seed mingle themselves with the people of the lands.” In truth, then as now, alliance with the world was the most successful snare of Satan; and hence there has ever been need for vigilance and for the enforcement of the truth of separation unto God. But there is a special reason for the introduction of this subject in this connection. The meaning of the wall, as pointed out more than once, is exclusion of evil, separation of God’s people from other nations (for us, from the world; from evil, whether in the world or in the Church), and thus to be set apart to God. When we read, therefore, of Israel purging themselves from the mixed multitude, we see that they were simply maintaining the truth of the wall; that, together with its dedication, they felt themselves bound to carry out into practice all that its completion signified. The reader will not fail to perceive the force of the term “the mixed multitude.” It was the mixed multitude that “fell a lusting” in the wilderness, and so became a hindrance and a curse to Israel; and ever since that day, whether in Israel or in the Church, they have been the source of almost all the evils that have afflicted the saints. It is among the mixed multitude that Satan ever finds ready instruments to his hands wherewith he may disturb, harass, and ensnare God’s people; so that the only pathway of safety is to follow the example of Israel before us in separating from it.

clickbible.org