

NEHEMIAH:

OR,

LABOUR AND CONFLICT.

An Exposition.

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INTRODUCTION.



IN commencing an exposition of the book of Nehemiah, a few brief remarks may be permitted by way of introduction to its study. Scarcely thirteen years had passed since Ezra had gone up to Jerusalem, armed with royal authority and impelled by his godly zeal for the glory of Jehovah in the welfare of His people, "to teach in Israel statutes and judgment;" to seek, in a word, to re-establish over the people the authority of the law. And now in His grace and tender mercy God prepared another vessel of blessing for His beloved people.* This fact illustrates in a striking manner a divine principle. It might have been thought that Ezra would be sufficient for the work; but, as is so often seen in the history of God's ways in government, a servant who is suited to one state of the people may be altogether unadapted for another, and even be a hindrance to the work of God if he continue to occupy his position or to assert his claims to leadership. How often has this been seen even in the assembly! More than this may be said. It will sometimes be the case that a less spiritual servant can be divinely employed where one who is more spiritual would be utterly out of place. Thus if a comparison is instituted between Ezra and Nehemiah, devoted as the latter was, and habitually turning to God as he did, as the source of

* As a matter of fact God never addresses Israel in this book as His people. The sentence of Lo-Ammi (Hosea i.) was still unreversed, whatever His gracious intervention and actions on their behalf.

all his strength, it will be at once perceived that Ezra walked on a higher level than his successor. (Compare Ezra viii. 21-23 with Nehemiah ii. 7-9; Ezra ix. 3 with Nehemiah xiii. 25.) Yet, though Ezra was still at Jerusalem, it was Nehemiah who is sent at this especial moment. Happy is it when the servant receives his work from the hands of the Lord, and, discerning when his mission for any particular purpose is ended, can retire.

In the book of Nehemiah, as well as in that of Ezra, it will be observed that God is ever watching over His people, and sustaining them by the successive interventions of His grace. First, He sent Ezra, and afterwards Nehemiah, to revive His work and to effect the restoration of His people. But as in the book of Judges, so at this period; and as it ever has been in the experience of the church, every successive revival, when the energy that produced it has died away, has left the people in a lower, a worse state than before. The reason is evident. The need for a revival springs from the fact of increasing corruption and decay. By the revival the downward tendency is for the moment checked or arrested; and hence the moment the force which came into conflict with the evil is expended, the corrupt stream sweeps onward with increased power and volume. Such is man; and such is the patient grace of God that, spite of the unfaithfulness and even apostasy of His people, it unweariedly continues to busy itself with their interests and blessing.

As to the character of the book itself we may quote the words of an author. He says, "In Nehemiah we witness the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and the restoration of what may be termed the civil condition of the people; but under circumstances that definitely prove their subjection to the Gentiles." This will be unfolded to us as we pursue our consideration of the book.

NEHEMIAH.



CHAPTER I.

THE book opens with a brief narrative of the circumstance which God used to touch the heart of Nehemiah by the condition of His people, and to produce those exercises of soul in His presence which issued, in the ordering and purpose of God, in his mission to Jerusalem. First, giving the date and the place of the occurrence, Nehemiah says "it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace," &c. The first verse of chapter ii. shows that this was the twentieth year of Artaxerxes; *i.e.*, as already noted, thirteen years after Ezra had gone up to Jerusalem. He had gone up from Babylon (Ezra vii.); but Nehemiah was occupied in the king's court as a personal attendant upon the king—"the king's cupbearer"—at Shushan.* While engaged in his duties, he says, "Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem." (v. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100)

Nehemiah himself was thus an exile; but, though one

* Shushan (or Susa) was originally the capital of Elam; afterwards it was incorporated into the kingdom of Babylon, and finally, on the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus, it passed into the possession of Persia, of which it seems, at the time of Nehemiah, to have been the metropolis. (See Smith's *Bible Dictionary*.)

of a captive race, he had found favour in the eyes of the king, and occupied a high and lucrative position. In such circumstances some might have forgotten the land of their fathers. Not so Nehemiah ; for he was evidently known as one who did not cease to remember Zion, from the fact of the visit, here recorded, of his brother Hanani and certain men of Judah. And from the nature of his question, it will be perceived that his heart embraced all the people of the land. He enquired "concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity," that is, concerning those that were left behind when so many were carried away captive to Babylon ; "and concerning Jerusalem"—concerning the remnant that had gone up, with the permission of Cyrus, to build the Lord's house. (Ezra i.) He was thus in fellowship with the heart of God, occupied as he was with His people and His interests. Surely Christians might learn many a lesson from these godly Jews. They never dreamt of isolating themselves from the whole nation, nor of seeking the welfare, for example, of a single tribe ; but their affections, according to their measure, moved throughout the entire circle of God's interests on the earth. They lost themselves, so to speak, in the welfare and blessing of the whole people. If the ties which bound them together were so intimate and imperishable, how much more should it be so with those who have been all baptized by one Spirit into one body !

In answer to his enquiry his visitors said, "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach : the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire." (v. 3.) A sad account indeed of the chosen people in the land of promise ! "A land," as Moses described it,

“of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven: a land which the Lord thy God careth for: the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.” (Deut. xi. 11, 12.) Ah! what a tale is unfolded by the present circumstances of the children of the captivity—a tale of sin, rebellion, and even apostasy. And what were their circumstances? They were in great affliction, arising out of their own moral condition and from the activity and enmity of their enemies by whom they were surrounded. (See chap. iv. 1, 2.) They were also in reproach. Blessed is it when God’s people are reproached because they are His people or on account of the name of their God (compare 1 Peter iv. 14); but nothing is more sorrowful than when the Lord’s people are reproached by, or become a reproach to, the world through their inconsistent walk and ways. And it would seem from the close of the book of Ezra that the reproach in this case was of the latter kind. Professing to be what they really were—God’s people—they were denying it by their alliances with the heathen and by their forgetfulness of the claims of their God.

That this is the interpretation of their affliction and sorrowful condition would seem to be borne out by the statement concerning Jerusalem: “The wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.” This was the fact, and Nebuchadnezzar had been the instrument, through his army, to accomplish it. (See 2 Chron. xxxvi.) There is however another meaning. The wall is the symbol of separation; and, as we have seen, the wall of separation between Israel and the heathen had been broken down. The gate was the place, and thus the emblem, of judgment; and we are thereby instructed

that justice and equity were no longer administered.* (See chapter v.)

What then could be more lamentable than this report which was conveyed to Nehemiah concerning the remnant in Judah and Jerusalem? And the effect was great upon this true-hearted Israelite. He says, "And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven." (v. 4.) He made the sorrowful state of the people his own. He felt it according to God. In their affliction he was afflicted. But he knew to whom to turn. He wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed. "Is any man afflicted?" says James, "let him pray." And the sorrow and affliction of Nehemiah, as expressed in his tears, mourning, and fasting, found an outlet in his prayer. This was a true mark of a mighty action of the Spirit of God upon his soul.

Let us then examine the nature of his supplications. He said, "I beseech thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and observe His commandments; let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee; both I and my father's house have sinned. We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses." (v. 5-7.)

* The reader may contrast the description of the heavenly Jerusalem, in Rev. xxi., with its wall "great and high," exclusive of all evil, and its twelve gates signifying perfection in the administration of government in righteousness.

So far, there are chiefly two things—vindication of God, and confession of sins. Nehemiah owns most distinctly God's faithfulness, that there has been no failure on His part; while, at the same time, he fully recognizes the character of God's relationship with Israel—that, in other words, His attitude towards them depended on their conduct. "He keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and observe His commandments." This, together with his address to God, brings out, in a most marked way, the contrast between law and grace. Devoted and God-fearing as Nehemiah was, one cannot but be sensible of distance in the terms which he uses—"O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God"—a distance necessitated by the dispensation under which he lived. How different from the place into which the Lord brought His disciples, consequent on His resurrection, as set forth in His words, "I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." But in the place he occupied, Nehemiah had learnt, what is rarely learnt, in such a measure, even by Christians, viz., how to be an intercessor for his people. "Day and night" he was praying for them; and hence it was that he had the power to confess their sins. No higher privilege could be vouchsafed to a servant than this which was granted to Nehemiah—the power so to identify himself with Israel, as to enable him to take up and confess their sins as his own. "I," he says, "and my father's house have sinned." This is a true sign of spiritual power. Many can lament the condition of God's people; but there are few who can identify themselves with it. It is only such that can truly intercede for them in the presence of God. And let it be noted, that, as yet, he could only take God's part against himself and his people. God is ever faithful to those that love

Him and observe His commandments; but, alas! they had not kept His commandments, nor His statutes, nor His judgments. All this is fully confessed; but he now turns to a promise on which he can ground his prayer, and count upon the interposition of God on his behalf. He proceeds: "Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: but if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there." (*vs.* 8, 9.) This reference is undoubtedly to Leviticus xxvi., and looks on to the final restoration of Israel. And herein lay the spiritual intelligence of Nehemiah, as led of the Spirit; for this restoration, as the reader may perceive if he turns to the chapter, will be a work of pure grace, founded upon God's absolute and unconditional covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (See Lev. xxvi. 42.) Nehemiah really, therefore, threw himself, while confessing the sins of his people, upon the mercy and unconditional promises of God. He rose in this way above law, and reached, in his faith, the source of all blessing—the heart of God Himself. Hence he adds, gathering strength by waiting on God, "Now these are thy servants, and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand." (*v.* 10.) He thus touchingly presents Israel, sinners and transgressors as they were, before God on the ground of redemption, reminding God, as He graciously permits His people to do, of His purposes of grace towards them.

Having reached the only foundation on which he could rest, he presents the special petition that lay upon his

heart. "O Lord," he says, "I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name; and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer." It is to be observed that Nehemiah associated others with him in his prayer. It was continually so also with the apostle Paul. The fact is, when we are led of the Spirit of God we necessarily identify all in whose hearts He is also working with ourselves; whether in service, or in thanksgivings, or prayer. So one are the people of God, that isolation in spirit is impossible; and hence, when Nehemiah is bowed before God in his sorrow for the state of Israel, and in his desires for their deliverance and blessing, he is assured that every godly Israelite is united with him in his supplications. His prayer is very simple; it is for "mercy in the sight of this man." For he knew that it was only through the king's permission that his desire could be accomplished. The sceptre of the earth having been transferred by God Himself, consequent upon the sin and rebellion of His chosen people, to the Gentiles, in acknowledgment of the authority which He Himself had ordained, God would now only work through and by means of the Gentile king. Nehemiah was therefore in communion with the mind of God in making this prayer. But it will also be perceived that, while he understood the position in which he and his people were placed in subjection to Gentile authority, the king was nothing, in the presence of God, but "this man." A monarch of almost universal dominion, he dwindled into nothingness before the eyes of faith, being nothing but a man invested with a brief authority for the accomplishment of the purposes of God. Faith thus recognizes that, while the

king was the appointed channel through which the requisite permission to go to Jerusalem must be obtained, all depended, not upon the king, but upon God acting on his mind to grant what Nehemiah desired.

Then Nehemiah adds the explanation—"For I was the king's cupbearer"—to show how, humanly speaking, he was both entirely subject to and dependent on the king. With this the chapter closes. Nehemiah has poured out his heart before the Lord, made known his request, and now he must wait, and many days he must wait, in expectation of the answer to his cries. A prayer may be entirely according to the will of God, and the fruit of communion with His mind, and yet not be immediately answered. This should be well understood, or the soul might be plunged into distress and unbelief without a cause. A prayer is often heard and granted, although God waits, in His infinite wisdom, for the suited moment to bestow the answer. This was the case with that of Nehemiah.

CHAPTER II.

THIS chapter is divided into several sections. First, we have the record of the manner in which God answered His servant's prayer, and disposed the heart of the king to grant all that was necessary for Nehemiah's journey and mission. (*vv.* 1-8.) Then there is a brief account of his journey to Jerusalem, together with the effect it produced in certain quarters. (*vv.* 9-11.) Next, Nehemiah describes his nocturnal survey of the condition of the walls of the city, as also his conference with the rulers upon the object he had in view. (*vv.* 12-18.) And, lastly, the opposition of the enemies of God's people is given, with Nehemiah's answer. (*vv.* 19, 20.)

It is exceedingly interesting to observe the way in which God brought about the accomplishment of Nehemiah's desire. Four months had passed since he had offered the prayer recorded in chapter i. He is careful to give us the dates. In the month Chisleu (answering to our November) he had prayed; and in the month Nisan (answering to our March) the answer came. During this period, man of faith as he was, he must have waited in daily expectation upon God. He could not foresee how the answer would come; but he knew that God could intervene when and how He would; and thus, to borrow a Hebrew expression, "in waiting he waited." It is in this way God both tries and strengthens the faith of His people. He waits while they wait. But if He wait, it is only to shut His people up to more entire dependence

upon Himself, and thus to prepare their hearts more fully for the blessing He is about to bestow. And when He steps in, it is oftentimes, as in this case, in such a quiet and unseen way—unseen by all but by the eye of faith—that it needs the exercise of faith to detect His presence. How natural thus is the way, on the surface, in which Artaxerxes was induced to give Nehemiah permission to visit Jerusalem, &c., only it must be remembered that Nehemiah had prayed that God would “grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Let us examine the scene.

The chapter as it opens shows us Nehemiah occupied with the duties of his office—as the king’s cupbearer. He “took up the wine, and gave it unto the king;” but his heart was occupied with other things, burdened as it was with the unutterable sorrow of his people’s condition. But wine and sadness are incongruous; for wine, as the Scripture tells us, maketh a man’s heart merry; and it was intolerable to the king that his cupbearer should wear a sorrowful face at such a time. It destroyed his own pleasure. And Nehemiah confesses that he “had not been beforetime sad in his presence.” The king therefore was angry and said, “Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart.” “Then,” says Nehemiah, “I was very sore afraid.” (v. 2.) And well he might have been; for in such a mood, like a true Oriental despot, Artaxerxes might have ordered him forth to instant execution. But if afraid, God preserved to him his presence of mind, and led him, out of the abundance of his heart, to tell simply and truly the cause of his sorrow. He said to the king, “Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?” (v. 3.) The king was not

unacquainted with the subject of his cupbearer's sorrow ; for he it was who had permitted Ezra to go up to build the temple, and had himself given gold and silver to aid his object. And God used Nehemiah's simple words to interest the king once more in the condition of Jerusalem. And he said, "For what dost thou make request?" Surely most would have hastened to answer the king, assuredly concluding that he would be certain, since he had deigned to put the question, to grant the desired favour. Not so Nehemiah (and this brings out a special trait of his character); for he says, "So I prayed to the God of heaven," and afterwards he presented his petition. Not that we are to conclude that he kept the king waiting. By no means. But the point to be observed is, that *before* he answered his master he cast himself upon his God—he prayed to the God of heaven. He thus acknowledges his dependence for wisdom to say the right thing, and reveals the special characteristic which another has termed "a heart that habitually turned to God." We might well seek the same grace ; for surely it is blessed at all times to be so walking in dependence on God, that when, in the presence of difficulties, perplexities, and dangers, we naturally (if we may use the word) look to the Lord for the needed wisdom, direction, and succour. When this is the case, the presence of God will be more real to us than the presence of men.

Having thus prayed, Nehemiah makes his request—"If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it." (v. 5.) The king (who had the queen at that moment sitting with him) having asked how long he proposed to be absent, etc., at once granted his request.

Nehemiah perceiving his opportunity—the opportunity God had vouchsafed—and strengthened by his faith, waxed bolder, and ventured to ask for royal letters “to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over, till I come into Judah; and a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace * which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into.” Such were his objects, precise and defined: The restoration of the fortress, necessary for the protection of the temple, the rebuilding of the walls of the city, and the erection of a house suitable for himself in the exercise of his office. “And,” we read, “the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.” (v. 8.) Before God he had poured out the desires of his heart (desires which God Himself had produced), to God he had looked for guidance and strength when in the presence of the king, and God now showed that He had undertaken for His servant by inclining the king to grant all that was necessary for the accomplishment of the work. And Nehemiah acknowledged this: “It was according to the good hand of my God upon me.”

It is well for us to mark this principle in the ways of God with His people. If He put within our hearts a desire for any service—a service for His glory—He will surely open out before us the way to it. If it be really His work on which our minds are set, He will enable us to do it in His own way and time. The door may seem

* It would seem that the more exact rendering of this word would be “fortress;” and that this may have been the celebrated fortress connected with the temple, afterwards known, during the Roman domination, as the tower of Antonia. (See Professor Sayce’s interesting *Introduction to Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.*)

to be closed and barred ; but if we wait on Him " who openeth and no man shutteth," we shall find that it will suddenly open to us, so that we may enter in without let or hindrance. There could be no more difficult position than this of Nehemiah ; but the Lord who had touched his heart with the affliction of his people removed all obstacles, and set him free for his labour of love in Jerusalem. " Wait on the Lord : be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart : wait, I say, on the Lord."

Nehemiah lost no time in the execution of his purpose. He knew how to redeem the opportunity ; for he adds, " Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters." But he had not gone alone ; he was escorted by captains of the army and horsemen. (*v.* 9.) There is a great difference, therefore, between his and Ezra's journey to Jerusalem. Ezra would not ask the king for any military escort, because he had expressed to the king his confidence in God (*chap.* viii. 22) ; and God had abundantly justified his confidence, in guarding him and his companions " from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way." Nehemiah was not endowed with the same simple faith ; but, though a godly and devout man, he travelled with the pomp and circumstance of one of the king's governors ; in a way, therefore, more likely to secure the respect of the world and the assistance of the king's servants. But immediately on his arrival, there was the sign of opposition to his mission—an opposition which grew and confronted him at every step ; for, in fact, it was the opposition of Satan to the work of God. At first it seemed a very small thing. It says, " When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly

that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel." (*v.* 10.) And why should they be grieved? The nationality of Sanballat is uncertain; probably he was a Moabite, and his servant was an Ammonite; and of these it is written, "that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever." (Chap. xiii. 1; Deut. xxiii. 3-6.) They were, therefore, the implacable foes of Israel; and, being as such the suited instruments of Satan, they were naturally antagonistic to any effort to improve the condition of the people they contemned. And, indeed, Satan's object is gained in the corruption of God's people; and as long as they are living in forgetfulness of their true place and character, associating themselves with the world, and adopting its manners and customs, Satan will be a professed friend. But the moment a man of God appears on the scene, and seeks to recall them to the claims of God and His truth, Satan is roused to active enmity. Not that this is always avowed. As in the case before us, his servants are only "grieved"—grieved, of course, that the peace, the peace between Israel and their enemies, should be disturbed. For the faithful ones in the midst of God's people, like Elijah of old, are ever regarded as the troublers of Israel—troublers because they stand for God in the midst of evil. Hence it was that Sanballat and Tobiah were "grieved" at the advent of Nehemiah; and, as we shall see, so bitter was their hatred, that they spared no labour to baffle him in his work, and even to compass his death. So far, however, the fact of their "grief" only is noticed; but the Spirit of God shows us thus the cunning of Satan, and the method of his activities.

There follows, in the next place, the account of Nehemiah's survey of the state of Jerusalem. After

three days, he says, "I arose in the night," the burden of his mission pressing upon his soul so that he could not rest, "I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon." (v. 12.) This simple statement reveals the characteristics of a true servant. First, he confesses the source of his inspiration for his work. God had put the thought of it into his heart. The assurance of this is the secret of all strength and perseverance in service. Thus the Lord said to Joshua, "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage." Then, as already noted, Nehemiah could not rest until he had commenced his labours. The work of God admits of no delays. This principle is involved in the charge of our blessed Lord to His disciples, "Salute no man by the way." When He sent them forth they must go straight on their mission. So felt Nehemiah; and he thus sallied forth on the first opportunity to learn the character and extent of the work God had put into his heart to do at Jerusalem. He tells us, moreover, that he did not communicate his secret to any. To have done so, indeed, might have raised up hindrances on every hand. When the Lord distinctly enjoins a service upon any of His servants, nothing is frequently more dangerous than consultation with others. Faith trusts in Him who commissions for the work, for the strength and wisdom needed in its execution. Conference with others often produces many questions; such as, Is it possible? Is it wise? or, Is it the proper time? And the effect is, that faith droops under the influence of many a suggested doubt, if it does not become altogether extinguished by prudence and common-sense. When the time arrives for the mission to be executed, helpers may

be welcomed; but until all is arranged according to the dictates of faith, the secret must be kept between the soul and God.

From verses 13–15, the description is given of Nehemiah's tour of inspection, and of the condition in which he found the walls and gates of the city—a condition which corresponded exactly with the report brought to him in Shushan. (Compare verse 13 with chap. i. 3. *) No one suspected the object Nehemiah had in view; for he adds, “And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.” (v. 16.) He had made his survey in silence—alone with God (though some attendants were with him), and gathered strength from his communings with God during the solemnity of that eventful night; and if his heart had been touched by the desolations of the holy city, it was only a feeble reflection of the pity and the compassion of Jehovah for the place which He Himself had chosen, and where, during the kingdom, He had dwelt between the cherubim on the mercy-seat.

All was now prepared, and hence the next thing we find is, that Nehemiah took the rulers, etc. into his confidence. He could allow no one to advise as to the work, because he had received his mission from the Lord; but now that it was only a question of its execution, he could welcome the aid and fellowship of others. This is ever the path of the man of faith. He cannot alter or modify his purposes; but he rejoices in associating others with himself, if they

* We may refer such of our readers as may be interested in the topography of ancient Jerusalem, and who would desire to identify the places mentioned by Nehemiah, to the book already mentioned—Professor Sayce's *Introduction*, p. 84.

are willing to help forward, in dependence on the Lord, the object he has in view. Nehemiah, therefore, said to the rulers and the rest of the people, "Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. Then I told them of the hand of my God, which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work." (*vv.* 17, 18.)

It is evident from this address also that Nehemiah's heart was sorely burdened with the condition of his people and city. It was the account of this which had first bowed him down to the ground in the presence of God (*chap.* i. 3, 4); and the words then used seemed to have been indelibly graven on his heart, for he uses them again, as we have seen, in verse 13, as also now in speaking to the people. It was intolerable to him, in his zeal for the Lord and for Jerusalem, that His chosen people should be in such a reproach to the heathen around; and his one desire was to rebuild the wall of separation, and to restore justice and judgment in their midst by setting up the gates. Why should the boar out of the wood continue to waste the vine which God had once more, in His mercy, replanted, and the wild beast of the field devour it? (*Ps.* lxxx.) Then, after exhorting them to build, he related to them concerning the hand of God which was good upon him, and concerning the king's permission (for by God's appointment as the result of His judicial dealing, they were all subject to the king's authority) to do the work which the hand of God had laid upon him. God wrought with His servant's words, and produced a ready response in His people's hearts, so that they said, "Let us rise up and

build." When we are in communion with God's mind, as to our service, He never fails to send the needed helpers. "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power"—words which contain a principle for all dispensations; for it is ever true, that when God goes forth in power for the accomplishment of any purpose, He prepares willing-hearted servants to execute His designs. So, in the present instance, "they strengthened their hands for this good work," for they had been made to feel that it was of God.

This working of the Spirit of God aroused again the opposition of the enemy. Whenever God works, Satan counterworks. It was so now; for "when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?" (v. 19.) In addition to the Moabite and Ammonite there is now an Arabian—every form of the flesh, as it were, lusting against the Spirit, stirred up as it had been by the craft and subtlety of Satan. It will be observed also that the opposition now assumes another character. At first Sanballat and Tobiah were grieved exceedingly at the intervention of Nehemiah. They affected to be sorry that he should come and disturb the peace that had prevailed between Israel and the heathen; but now they "laughed us to scorn, and despised us." One weapon is as good as another in the hands of the enemy. Seeing that their grief did not affect the purposes of Nehemiah, they would try mockery and contempt; and at the same time they would, if possible, produce fear by insinuating a charge of rebellion. Surely we need to be acquainted with the wiles and devices of Satan, for he knows how to work

upon every possible feeling of the natural man. Nehemiah, strong in the sense of the protection of God, and knowing that he was in the path of obedience, was proof against all his artifices. He said, "The God of heaven, He will prosper us; therefore we, His servants, will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem." (v. 20.) "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you," says the apostle James. And Nehemiah resisted him by a bold confession of the name of his God, of confidence in His protecting care, and by the expression of His claims over His servants, and by the utter refusal of the title of the enemy to any right or interest in the holy city. There is nothing like boldness in the face of the adversary; but this can only spring from a divine courage, begotten by the assurance that "if God be for us, none can be against us."

CHAPTER III.

THE zeal of Nehemiah was used of the Lord to rouse almost the whole people. There were degrees of energy amongst them, and it may be lukewarmness if not hostility in the hearts of some ; but outwardly, and by profession, nearly all came forth and offered their services as builders. It was, in fact, a real revival ; and such an one as could only be produced by the Spirit of God. And the value God set upon it, is seen in that He has caused the names of those who engaged in this work to be written and preserved. This very circumstance shows that they had His mind in building the wall. It could not be otherwise ; for what was the meaning of their proposed work ? It was that they, led forward by Nehemiah, confessed their need of separation from the nations around, and took measures to secure it. Long ages before, Moses had said to the Lord, "Wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight ? is it not in that thou goest with us ? *so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth.*" (Exodus xxxiii. 16.) They had forgotten this truth ; but now, through grace, they were about once again to take the place of a people set apart for God. Such is the significance of the activity recorded in this chapter ; though, alas ! their energy and faithfulness were soon proved to be like the morning cloud that passes away.

There is much to interest in the details of the chapter, a chapter that can scarcely fail to remind the reader of

Romans xvi., in which the apostle Paul, as guided of the Spirit, specifies so many of the saints by name, and describes, in many cases, their different characteristics in service. For example, he says, "Salute Tryphena and Tryphosa, who labour in the Lord. Salute the *beloved* Persis, who laboured *much* in the Lord." (v. 12.) Thus by adding two words, in his salutation to Persis, he gives her a special place before God, as well as in his affections and the affections of the saints, and a superior commendation. So in our chapter we read, "After him Baruch the son of Zabbai *earnestly* repaired the other piece." (v. 20.) It tells us with what minuteness (if we may so speak) God surveys His people, how carefully He notes the state of their hearts and the character of their service, and how grateful to Him is the exhibition of devotedness to His glory. Such commendations—not of man, but of God, and therefore infallible—while they, on the one hand, anticipate the judgment-seat of Christ, should, on the other, stir us all up to seek the same zeal and unwearied diligence in the Lord's service.

While we may leave the reader to examine for himself this interesting record, some of its details may profitably be indicated.*

Eliashib the high priest, and his brethren the priests, are the first workers mentioned; not, it is to be concluded, because they surpassed the rest in energy or devotedness, but rather because of the position they occupied amongst

* As already explained, it is no part of our present object to dwell upon the topographical references in the book. Those who are interested in such matters can easily procure one of the many books upon the subject. It should be added, however, that conjecture and speculation are often offered to the reader in the place of positive information. The latest publications of the *Palestine Exploration Society* are as trustworthy as any.

the people. It is their rank, as will be afterwards seen, that gives them the precedence in the record, "They builded the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up the doors of it; even unto the tower of Meah they sanctified it, unto the tower of Hananeel." Comparing this account with that in verse 3, a significant difference will be noted. "But the fish gate did the sons of Hassenaah build, who also laid the beams thereof, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof." (See also verse 6.) The high priest and his brethren builded a gate, and set up its doors, but they did not lay "the beams thereof" to give it stability, nor is it mentioned that they provided locks or bars. The truth is, they were not so much in earnest as the sons of Hassenaah, and Jehoiada the son of Paseah, and his companion. They were willing to have the gate and its doors; but they made no provision to make it secure, in case of need, against the ingress of the enemy. They did not object to the convenience, but they were not prepared to renounce all commerce with the enemy. And the reason was, that Eliashib himself, in whose mouth the law of truth should have been found, and who should have walked with God in peace and equity, and have turned many from iniquity (Mal. ii. 6), was allied unto Tobiah the Ammonite (chap. xiii. 4), and his grandson was son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. (xiii. 28.) He had, therefore, but faint heart for the work of separation, connected as he was, by such intimate ties, with the enemies of Israel, though under the influence of the energetic Nehemiah, he made a show of agreement with his brethren in their efforts to rebuild the wall and gates of the city. It was a solemn position for the high priest, as well as a source of danger to the people.

In verse 5 an exception is noted—"And next unto

them the Tekoites repaired; but their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord." The Tekoites were willing servants; for in verse 27 it is said that they "repaired another piece." They evidently were zealous men, and this in spite of the indifference, if not opposition, of "their nobles." It is often the case, when God is working in the midst of His people, that "the nobles" are outside the circle of blessing. Even as not many mighty, not many noble are called of God in His grace, so in revivals, in new and distinct actions of the Spirit of God, the first to respond to His energy are most generally found amongst the poor and despised. The "nobles" may, in God's tender mercy, be drawn in afterwards; but He most frequently begins with the poor of this world, whom He has chosen rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He has promised to them that love Him. Moreover, the cause of the dissent of these nobles is apparent. They "put not their necks to the work of their Lord." Pride was governing their hearts. They could not stoop low enough. They were not accustomed to the yoke, and they thus preferred their own importance and ease to the Lord's work. What a contrast to Him who, though rich, became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich for ever! He came into this world, to do the will of God, and was in the midst of His own "as One that serveth;" and having finished the work which the Father gave Him to do, He has, in His unspeakable grace and love, become for ever the servant of His people. It is well for every child of God to learn the lesson, that it is only in bowing their necks to the Lord's yoke that rest to their souls can be found. The nobles of Tekoa chose their own will, and lost by their stubbornness the blessing of the service offered to them, and at the same

time procured for themselves everlasting exclusion from the commendation given to their brethren, as well as a mark of condemnation for their pride.

In several cases it is specified that certain repaired over against their houses. (*vv.* 10, 23, 28, 29, etc.) In these notices two things have to be distinguished—the fact and the teaching of the fact. The fact was, as stated, that these children of Israel undertook the building of the wall opposite their own dwellings; but, over and above this, the Spirit of God would have us understand its meaning. And it is not far to seek. We are thus taught—bearing in mind that the wall is an emblem of separation—that these servants of the Lord began first with their own houses; that they sought first of all to bring their own families into subjection to the word of God, and thereby to effect separation from evil within the circle of their own responsibility. And this has ever been the divine order. Thus when God called Gideon to be the deliverer of His people, He commanded him to throw down the altar of Baal in his father's house before he could go forth to battle against the Midianites. As another has remarked, "Faithfulness within precedes outward strength. Evil must be put away from Israel before the enemy can be driven out. Obedience first and then strength. This is God's order." The record, therefore, that these several individuals repaired every one over against his house, shows that conscience was at work; that they rightly understood God's claims upon them in the sphere of their own homes, and that they felt that to set their houses in order was a necessary qualification for any public service. This principle obtains also in the church. "A bishop," writes the apostle, must be "one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjec-

tion with all gravity." And deacons are also required to "rule their children and their own houses well." (1 Tim. iii.) And it is to the loss of the church and of the saints, as well as to the damage of the souls of those who take the place of rule in the assembly, when this principle is neglected. It is true that the Spirit of God enjoins us to obey them that have the rule over us; but it is likewise important that those who have the lead should possess the scriptural qualifications for the places they have assumed or accepted.

Another interesting point may be noticed. Some who built the gates and assisted with the wall did not repair over against their houses. Eliashib the high priest, for example (comp. *v.* 1 with *vv.* 20, 21), and those who repaired over against their houses, are not said to have assisted in building the gates, etc. Two classes of saints are herein indicated. The first class are what may be termed ecclesiastical saints; *i.e.*, those who are strong upon church-truth, and in maintaining the truth of separation from evil for the church, and at the same time are careless as to their own houses. A more sorrowful spectacle cannot be presented in the church of God (and one not infrequently seen), when a public advocate of the claims of Christ over His people, of the maintenance of His authority in the midst of those who are gathered to His name, allows his own house, through its disorder, to become an occasion of reproach by the enemy. Eliashib is an example, in this very chapter, of this class. Whatever the indifference of his heart, he was professedly engaged in the maintenance of separation and justice and judgment in Israel—through building, together with his brethren, the gate and sanctifying it; while, at the same time, he left others to care for the wall over against his own house. (See *vv.* 20, 21.)

Tending the vineyard of others, his own vineyard he had not kept ; and this is proved by the fact already mentioned, that he was allied unto Tobiah the Ammonite, while his grandson married a daughter of Sanballat the Horonite. Eli and Samuel and David of an earlier day are also examples of this numerous class.

Then there are others, as we learn from this chapter, who, most zealous in tending their own houses, and regulating them according to God, are almost entirely careless of the welfare of the church. Such have apprehended the truth that they themselves individually are to be witnesses for Christ ; but they have not learnt that the church is to be a light-bearer in the midst of the world. In other words, they have not realized the oneness of God's people, that believers are "the body of Christ, and members in particular." As a consequence, while they fully admit that the word of God is their guide as to their individual path, they do not recognize its authority over the saints collectively or corporately. They are thus often linked with such departures from the truth, such disregard of the supremacy of Christ as Head of the church, through their public connection with the people of God, as would fill them with fear if they did but own their responsibility in the church as well as in their own families. But if we understand the position in which through grace we have been set, it will be our earnest desire to unite the repairing over against our own houses with building the wall and the gates.

Nothing in the service of the Lord's people passes unnoticed ; and thus in verse 12 we read, that "next unto him repaired Shallum the son of Halohesh, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, *he and his daughters.*" The zeal of these godly women has thus obtained for them a

place in this memorial of the work of the Lord. Such a record, as well as the more abundant records of the New Testament, shows that there is never any difficulty as to women's place in service when they are filled with the energy of the Spirit of God. The account preserved of Joanna the wife of Chuza, Susanna, and many others, who ministered to the Lord of their substance, of Mary and Martha, of Phœbe, a servant of the church, of Priscilla, of Persis, and of many more, is surely sufficient for guidance to any who are willing to sit at Jesus' feet and learn His mind. This scripture gives us not necessarily what man, but what God saw. The father and his daughters were both engaged in repairing the wall, and the fact that it is mentioned is its commendation. Beyond this nothing can be said; but the examples already cited are enough to teach that there is room enough in the church of God, and also in the world, for women's utmost energy and devotedness to Christ, provided it be exhibited in subjection to Him and to His word.

In the case of Meshullam the son of Berechiah it is said that he repaired over against *his chamber*. (v. 30.) It would seem that he had no house, only a lodging; but though the circle of his responsibility was narrow, he was found faithful. As the apostle speaks of stewardship, "If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not." This should be a comfort to those who are tempted to long after wider spheres of service. It is fidelity in the place in which the Lord has placed us that He values and commends; and hence the work of Meshullam is singled out for notice equally with that of Shallun the son of Col-hozeh, the ruler of part of Mizpah, of whom it is said that "he repaired the gate of the fountain;" "he built it,

and covered it, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof, and the wall of the pool of Siloah by the king's garden, and unto the stairs that go down from the city of David." (v. 15.)

Reviewing the whole chapter, two other points of great importance may be specified. The reader will observe that some laboured in companies and some alone. Some were happiest when serving in fellowship with their brethren, and some preferred, while in full communion with the object their brethren had in view, to labour in single-eyed dependence upon, and alone with, the Lord. The same thing is observed in every age of the Church. There are vessels which are adapted for lonely service, and there are others almost useless unless in association with others. There are dangers besetting the path of both. The former are often tempted to be isolated, and to forget that the Lord has other servants working for the same ends; while the latter are sometimes betrayed into forgetfulness of individual dependence, as well as into the sacrifice of their own convictions as to the Lord's will in order to secure peace and union. The important thing is to receive the service from the Lord, to labour as He directs, to go where He sends, whether alone or in company with others, and ever to maintain a single eye to His glory. Happy is that servant who has learnt the lesson that it is the Lord's will, and not his own, which must govern the whole of his activities.

The second noteworthy thing is the variety of the service of these children of Israel. One did one thing and one another, while all were working for the same end. It was no mean shadow of the various functions of the members of the body, Paul, speaking of this, says, "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that

is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministry: or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation," etc. (Rom. xii. 6, 7.) The importance of occupying the position given us to fill, and of exercising the special gift, or function in the body, bestowed upon us, cannot be too much pressed. Every Christian has his own place, which no one else can fill, and his own work, which no other can do; and the health and prosperity of the assembly depend upon the recognition and the practice of this truth.

CHAPTER IV.

IN chapter iii. 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 ii. 10, the enemy was "grieved exceedingly." Then he tried mockery and scorn (ii. 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 of faith wherewith to quench his fiery darts. For what was Nehemiah's resource in the presence of this new form of hostility?

He said, "Hear, O 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 defence 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 upwards, 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 secondly, 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 afterwards 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 labours 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 labours; 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 labours. 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. i. 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 marshalled 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 learnt the lesson Elisha taught his servant, when the king of Syria had sent an army to take him, viz., 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 our God, and set our watch against them day and night, because of them." He thus combined dependence on God, in whom alone he knew his strength and defence 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. xxvi. 41.) The apostle likewise writes, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance," etc. (Ephes. vi. 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 defence, 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 defence.

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 burden-bearers 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. Secondly, 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 ourselves 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 yet 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 labour 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, 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

defence; 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 defence by setting "the people after their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows, in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places." 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. (*Comp.* Ephes. vi. 10-17.) Thereupon Nehemiah inspired the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people with words of exhortation. He said, "Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses." (*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 continue 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.* xx. 8.) While, however, Nehemiah urged them not to fear, he supplied the antidote, "Remember the Lord," he says, "who 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: "But 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.

The effect of Nehemiah's vigilant and energetic activity and preparation for defence 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 labour, Nehemiah made effectual provision for defence 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—"everyone 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 labourers 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 is it 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, labouring to build up themselves and others on their most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, seeking to maintain the truth of the church amongst 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. x. 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 truth that has in every age produced confusion in the church, and hence too much stress can never 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 laboured. 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 laboured, 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 defence 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 trumpets may be gathered from Numbers x. 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 labours, and thus to do the work of the enemy. To be able to sound at the right moment, they must be with, and having their eye 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 labours, 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 alarm. 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 labours 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 in their work; for the Lord's mind for them at that moment would be defence, 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. Lastly, 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 defence 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 succour. 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 laboured 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 before 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 labour on the day." (v. 22.) The day for labour 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. vi. 12; John iii. 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 Canticles 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.*" (Chapter iii. 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 labour 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 Timothy ii. 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.

CHAPTER V.

INSTEAD of continuing the narrative of building the wall, Nehemiah turns aside to describe the state of things within—amongst the people. And this is most instructive. If we are occupied in dealing with evil from without, we cannot afford to neglect our own moral condition or the condition of the assembly. This has been too often the case; so that it will be sometimes seen that zealous contenders for the truth are altogether neglectful of self-judgment and of discipline in the house of God. No sadder spectacle can be witnessed than an assembly, for example, which is utterly careless of its own state, of its own want of subjection to the word of God, proclaiming the need of separation from evil-doers or from false doctrine. Vessels unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, become prepared unto every good work by being themselves purged from all that by which they might be contaminated or defiled. Such too is the lesson of these chapters. Conflict characterizes chapter iv., and now in chapter v. the lesson must be learnt that the builders and warriors must have on the breastplate of righteousness if they are to resist successfully the attacks of the foe.

In verse 1 the internal difficulty is indicated—"And there was a great cry of the people and their wives against their brethren the Jews." (Compare Acts vi.) "The people and their wives" are evidently the poor, while "their brethren the Jews" are the rich. And division had come in through oppression by the latter,

taking occasion through the poverty of the former to enrich themselves. (Compare James v., and also 1 Cor. xi. 17-22.) Some had sold their sons and daughters to the rich for corn, that they might eat and live. Some had, with the same object, under pressure from the dearth, mortgaged their lands, vineyards, and houses; and others had borrowed money upon the security of their lands and vineyards to pay the king's tribute. The rich had used the needs of their poorer brethren to become richer, and to bring them completely under their power. The poor, bowed to the dust under the heavy burden of their bondage and need, raised "a great cry," and said, "Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards." (*vv.* 2-5.)

Such was the sad condition of the returned remnant, even while they were engaged in building the walls of their holy city Jerusalem. Let us then seek to discover the root of this festering sore. It lies in a word—used twice—"their *brethren*," "our *brethren*." They were brethren as being common descendants of Abraham, and even in a deeper sense. As God's chosen people they were alike on the ground of redemption, and all therefore were on the same footing before Him—the common objects of His grace, and as such heirs together of the promises made to their fathers. It was in view of this that Malachi challenged them with the question, "Have we not all one Father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers?" (Chapter ii. 10.) So now "the Jews" were dealing with the people as if they were

not their brethren, in utter forgetfulness of the common relationship in which they stood before God, and so treating them as if they were aliens and heathen. The same evils reappear in varying forms in every age, and are especially noticed in the epistle of James. (See chapter i. 9, 10; chapters ii. and v.)

But there was more than forgetfulness of relationship in this conduct on the part of the Jews. There was also positive disobedience. (See Exodus xxii. 25; Deut. xv.) We may cite one verse: "If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates, in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother; but thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth." (Deut. xv. 7, 8. Read the whole chapter.) As being themselves the recipients of grace, they were to express that grace to their brethren. (Comp. 2 Cor. viii. 9 *et seq.*) But instead of this they denied, as we have pointed out, the truth of their redemptive position, and, exhibiting a spirit of rigour and oppression for the sake of gain, they violated the plainest precepts of the word of God. There are few who, as they read this narrative, would not condemn such gross disobedience; and yet it may be asked, What did it amount to? Simply the adoption of human thoughts instead of God's, of worldly usages and practices instead of those prescribed in the Scriptures. In a word, these Jews walked as men, and as men who hastened to be rich at the expense of their brethren! And is this sin unknown in the church of God? Nay, do not the usages of society and the maxims of the world often force themselves among Christians, and regulate their mutual relationships? Let

our own consciences answer the question in the presence of God, and we shall soon discover if the sin of these Jews has its counterpart to-day amongst the Lord's people.

This was the state of things amongst the returned captives—the restored remnant; a moral condition that necessarily crippled the efforts of Nehemiah to cope with the advancing tide of evil from without. He tells us, "I was very angry when I heard their cry, and these words." His faithful heart entered into the sorrowful condition of his poor brethren, and he was righteously indignant with their oppressors. So Paul of a later date, according to the truth of the dispensation in which he was, exclaimed, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?" (2 Cor. xi. 29.) In both cases, the anger of Nehemiah, and the sympathy of Paul, in their identification with the sorrows of God's people, were reflections, however feeble, of the heart of God Himself. (Compare Exodus iii. 7, 8.)

But the question for Nehemiah was, How could this state of things be remedied? The answer is found in verses 7-12. Observe the remarkable expression, "Then I consulted with myself" (*v.* 7); for therein is contained a principle of the utmost importance. The nobles and rulers, with whom, in ordinary circumstances, he might have taken counsel, were the chief offenders; and no light therefore or assistance could be expected from them. Thus it was that Nehemiah was cast on his own resources, or rather that he was shut up to God for guidance in the matter. When all have departed out of the way, and when, as a consequence, the authority of the word of God has been obscured, the man of faith—one who desires to walk with God—cannot afford to consult with others, or he might be fettered with their counsel;

he must act alone and for himself, at whatever cost, according to the Word; and in this necessity he finds both strength and courage, because it begets confidence in the Lord, and ensures His presence. Hence the next step was that Nehemiah "rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them." (v. 7.) He convicted them of their sin (see Exodus xxii. 25); and, according to the apostolic injunction, rebuked them before all, saying, "We, after our ability, have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer," etc. (vv. 8-14.)

There are several points in Nehemiah's address worthy of special remark. It will be seen, in the first place, that he is enabled to rebuke the offenders by contrasting their conduct with his own. He had redeemed his brethren from the heathen; they had brought them into bondage to themselves, lording it over God's heritage. Most blessed is it when a shepherd amongst the people of God can point to his own conduct as their guide. It was so with the apostle Paul. Again and again he was led of the Holy Spirit to refer to himself as an example. (See Acts xx. 34, 35; Phil. iii. 17; 1 Thess. i. 5, 6, etc.) So was it with Nehemiah in this instance. And in what a light did he thus place the conduct of the nobles and rulers! Nehemiah, from love to his brethren, and from grief for the dishonour to Jehovah's name by their condition, spent his substance in their redemption; they, from love to themselves, and from a desire to increase in riches, used the necessities of their brethren to bind the yoke of bondage about their necks. Nehemiah showed the spirit

of Christ (compare 2 Cor. viii. 9), and they the spirit of Satan. Having thus exposed the nature of their conduct, he appeals to them on another ground. "Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God, because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?" (v. 9.) This appeal shows how dear to Nehemiah was the honour of his God, and that it grieved him to the heart to think that the conduct of Israel should furnish a just occasion for reproach from the enemy. They claimed, and claimed rightly, to be God's chosen people; and as such to be holy, to be separated from all the rest of the nations for His service. But if in their walk they resembled the heathen, what became of their profession? They did not cease to be God's people, but by their conduct they denied that they were, and publicly profaned the holy name by which they were called. No greater damage can be done by God's people than to give the enemy just ground for taunting them with their practices. (Contrast 1 Peter ii. 11, 12; iii. 15, 16; iv. 15-17.) On this appeal he based his exhortation—first, to cease to do evil, and then to learn to do well. Reminding them again, that he and his brethren and servants might have acted, if they had chosen, in a similar manner, he says, "I pray you, let us leave off this usury." Remark that he says, "let *us*;" putting himself in grace alongside of them in their sins, acknowledging, indeed, that he was one with them before God, and seeking thus in a spirit of meekness to effect their restoration. Moreover, he urged upon them to make restitution, to give back that day "their lands, etc., that ye exact of them." (v. 11.)

The Lord was with His servant, and they consented to do as they had been urged; but Nehemiah, unwilling to leave the matter in any doubt, or fearing that they might

be tempted, when they went back to their homes, to forget their promise, "called the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise." Even more, to give greater solemnity to the transaction, he says, "Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the Lord. And the people did according to this promise." (v. 13.) In this manner Nehemiah laboured for the good of the people, and corrected the abuses that had sprung up in their midst to the destruction of order, holiness, and fellowship.

From verse 14 to the end of the chapter, Nehemiah is led to give an account of his own conduct as governor. Looking at this, according to man, it might seem to be self-commendation and exaltation; but it must never be forgotten that we are reading God's word, and that it was therefore as guided of the Holy Spirit that this description is recorded for our instruction. And, as before observed, the lesson is, that the shepherds whom the Lord raises up for His people should ever be "ensamples to the flock." (See 1 Peter v. 1-3.) Bearing this in mind, we shall be able to profit by the presentation of Nehemiah's conduct. First, he tells us that, for the twelve years he had been governor, neither he nor his brethren had eaten the bread of the governor as his predecessors had done; *i.e.*, he had not, as he explains, been "chargeable unto the people." (vv. 14, 15.) His office entitled him to be so, but he did not use his authority in this respect. We are again reminded of the apostle Paul, who wrote to the Corinthians, "If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? If others be

partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ." (1 Cor. ix. 11-13, *et seq.*; see also Acts xx. 33; 1 Thess. ii. 9.) Neither did he, like the former governors, permit his servants to bear rule over the people. No abuse is more common, even in the church of God, than that here indicated. It is often seen, for example, to the sorrow of the saints, and the perversion of the divine order, that the relatives of those who rightly have the place of rule assume place and authority, and expect to be acknowledged because of their relationship. As in Nehemiah's case, so also in the Church, office is personal, for qualification or gift is divinely bestowed, and cannot be transmitted to another. Even Samuel failed in this respect when he made his sons judges; and it was their conduct that provoked the people of Israel to desire a king. (1 Samuel viii. 1-5.)

Nehemiah was saved from this by walking and acting before God. "So did not I," he says, "because of the fear of God." This reveals to us a man whose conscience was tender and in lively exercise; one who was watchful over his ways and conduct, lest he might be governed by self-will or his own advantage, instead of God's word; one who cherished an habitual reverence both for His presence and His authority, and, maintaining a holy fear in his soul, ever sought to commend himself to the Lord. This was the secret both of his uprightness and devotedness, for he is able to say that he had been willing to spend and be spent in the Lord's service. "Yea, also I continued in the work of this wall, neither bought we any land; and all my servants were gathered thither unto the work." He gave himself to the work, he sought no earthly possessions for himself, and his servants, as well as himself, were

devoted to building the wall. A blessed example surely of self-denial and consecration, and one well calculated, as the fruit of the grace of God, to stimulate the godly to follow in his steps, and to rebuke the avarice and covetousness of those who were trading upon their brethren's necessities. Nor was this all. "Moreover," he adds, "there were at my table an hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, besides those that came unto us from among the heathen that are about us;" *i.e.*, Jews who were scattered among the other peoples who at that time inhabited Palestine. And the next verse (18) tells us of the daily provision for his table, and of the store of all sorts of wine furnished once in ten days. From this we learn that Nehemiah was given to hospitality, and that he was "not forgetful to entertain strangers." He had therefore one of the qualifications which the apostle gives as indispensable for a bishop in the church of God (1 Tim. iii. 2) —a qualification which perhaps is now not so much esteemed as in former days. But it may be questioned whether anything more tends to bind together the hearts of the saints, and thus to promote fellowship, than the exercise of hospitality according to God. The word of God abounds in examples as well as in commendations of it. It was the special service of one beloved saint, as shown in his description by the apostle, when he wrote, "Gaius mine host, and of the whole church, saluteth you." (Rom. xvi. 23. See also 3 John.) The source of its exercise is the activity of grace in the heart—delighting to give, and to be made happy in the happiness of others. It is therefore no mean expression of the heart of God. "Yet for all this," Nehemiah adds, "required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people." (v. 18.) His heart was touched with their condition,

and he had learnt the lesson that it was more blessed to give than to receive. He thus dispensed bountifully to those that came to him, and seems to have welcomed all.

Nor did he look for any human recompense, but, turning to God, in whose presence he walked and laboured, he said, "Think upon me, my God, according to all that I have done for this people." (v. 19.) It has been often said that this prayer, as others recorded by him, is evidence that Nehemiah moved on a low spiritual platform, as it would have been a far higher thing had he not thought of any recompense at all. It may be so ; and, as we have pointed out, Nehemiah certainly had not the simple faith of Ezra. On the other hand, we cannot fail to see in the sketch here given that he was distinguished, in a day of confusion and ruin, by a rare devotedness to the service of his God, by an upright conscience, and by an utter self-forgetfulness in his intense desire for the glory of God in the welfare of His people. All that he was, and had, was laid upon the altar, yielded up to God for His use and service, and while it may be admitted that there are loftier prayers than the one here recorded, we prefer to see in it the expression of an earnest desire for the blessing of God in connection with his labours for His people. The Lord Himself said, "Whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward." It was in the spirit of this, and knowing the faithful Jehovah he had to do with, that Nehemiah turned away from all thought of selfish advantage to God, in the confidence that He who had wrought in his heart this love to His people would not allow him to lose his reward. Like Moses, he had "respect unto the recompence of the reward," but it was not from men, but from God.

CHAPTER VI.

IN this chapter Nehemiah returns to his conflicts with the enemy, brought upon him in connection with building the wall of the city. Chapter v. is therefore really parenthetical, although, as we have seen, it teaches, in its connection with the sixth, an important truth. In it Nehemiah was engaged in correcting abuses within, and, having been enabled to restore the relationships of the people according to the Word, he resumes his narrative of the activity of the adversary. But though the subject is the same, there is a great difference between chapters iv. and vi. In the former the enemy displayed his opposition, in the latter he practises subtlety, and seeks to decoy under the guise of friendship, rather than to deter by the exhibition of his power. We shall accordingly find traces of his presence within as well as without. If in chapter iv. he appears as a roaring lion, in chapter vi. he seeks to circumvent by his wiles—the two forms in which he ever opposes the people of God. (See Ephes. vi. 11; 1 Peter v. 8, 9.)

The first two verses open out to us the first wile of the adversary. "Now it came to pass, when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates), that Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono." The diligence

and perseverance of Nehemiah, overcoming, through the blessing of God, all obstacles, had carried on the work almost to completion. "No breach" was left in the wall, and consequently there was now no covert way of entrance. The doors were still unhung, but these were open to observation, and by these only could the enemies of God's people approach. It was time therefore to put forth their final effort, and they accordingly propose a conference, as if they too were interested in the welfare of Israel! But when the servant of the Lord is walking in His presence, and with purpose of heart is pursuing the path of His will, he is never deceived by Satan's artifices. Thus it was with Nehemiah, and hence he adds, "But they thought to do me mischief." He knew that darkness could have no communion with light, that Satan could not contemplate with pleasure the progress of the Lord's work, that hating his Master, he must hate also His servant. Accordingly he penetrated at once to the heart of the object Sanballat and his companions had in view. Still he "sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (v. 3.) When the Lord sent forth His disciples, He charged them to salute no man by the way (Luke x.), that they might learn the absorbing character of His claims, that, when engaged on His service, they had no leisure to turn aside for friendly salutations, but must unwearyingly pursue their mission. Nehemiah had therefore the Lord's mind in the answer he sent, apart from his knowledge of the evil nature of their designs. Doing a great work, it was his business to persevere, even if friends had solicited him to leave it; and to leave it but for a moment would cause it to cease. It was impossible—consistent with the claims

of his service—for him to “come down.” Many of us might with advantage be instructed by the example of this faithful servant; indeed, it would save us from many a snare. The Lord’s work, if it be His work, is not to be taken up and laid down at will; but when He puts it into our hands it claims our first and constant attention, and is worthy of all our energies in its accomplishment. “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do” (if of the Lord) “do it with thy might.”

The enemy was not content to let the matter rest. “They sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner.” (*v.* 4.) If faithfulness characterized Nehemiah in refusing to go, divine wisdom is equally apparent in the mode of his answer. It was “after the same manner.” The circumstances had not changed, and hence his first answer was sufficient. But Satan was practising upon the weakness of the human heart. He knew that souls are often betrayed by importunity. It was so with Samson. There was as much reason for his refusal to tell his secret at last as at first; but Delilah “pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death; that he told her all his heart.” (*Judges xvi.*) It is often so with ourselves, ignorant, as we are to our shame, of Satan’s devices.

Failing to seduce Nehemiah by this plan, another artifice is now tried. “Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner, the fifth time, with an open letter in his hand; wherein was written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel,” &c. (*v.* 5-7.) Sanballat affects to be careful of Nehemiah’s reputation, and to be fearful lest his proceedings should be misinterpreted! It was a most

subtle mask which he assumed, for he contrives in his letter to insinuate three distinct charges, which, if reported to the king, might well endanger Nehemiah's character if not his life. First, he speaks of rebellion, and even adduces a witness—Gashmu or Geshem, the Arabian ; then he suggests, what might, if indeed the first allegation were true, be connected with it ; viz., that Nehemiah's object in building the wall was to make himself king. And, finally, he says that it was reported that he had appointed prophets to preach of him in Jerusalem, saying, "There is a king in Judah." It is more than likely that there was a show of truth in the last statement. A man so interested as Nehemiah was in his nation, would not forget that all their hopes were centred in the promised Messiah ; and he may have sought, through the ministry of prophets, to revive the flagging energies of the people by recalling to their minds the glowing descriptions of the future kingdom under the sway of the true David, as recorded, for example, in the writings of Isaiah. A stranger could not enter into this or understand it, and might well conclude that Nehemiah was sowing sedition and rebellion. The craft of Satan therefore is plainly distinguished in Sanballat's letter. But he had to do with one whose confidence was in God for wisdom as for strength ; and hence it was that this attempt upon Nehemiah, like the former, completely failed. His answer is simplicity itself ; a plain denial in a few words of the truth of these alleged reports, while at the same time he traced them back to their true source—Sanballat's own wicked heart. "There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart." (*v.* 8.) And this answer teaches us that we should never enter into argument with the tempter ; repel his accusations we may, but if we once begin to reason

with him, or even to explain, we shall surely be vanquished. If Nehemiah alone had been concerned, it would have been well; but though the leader, and acting for the people, he could not infuse into them his trust in God and his courage. This will explain his statement: "For they all made us afraid" (the "us" being really the people, Nehemiah identifying himself with them), "saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done." This was Satan's object, to wear out the people by these continued harassing assaults, raining down fiery darts upon them incessantly—darts which only the shield of faith could intercept and quench, and which without this shield could only produce despondency and fear if not destruction. None knew this better than this faithful and devoted servant, or how to avail himself of the weapons of defence against his artful adversary. Hence, while he maintained untiring vigilance against the enemy, he prayed without ceasing. The enemy had said "their hands shall be *weakened*." Nehemiah prayed, "Now therefore, O God" (these words, "O God," being rightly inserted), "*strengthen* my hands." Nothing can be more beautiful than the spectacle of this man of God, pressed on every side, turning to God for the needful strength. What could the enemy do with such a man—a man who leaned upon the Almighty God as his defence and shelter? He was powerless, utterly powerless; and he confessed his defeat by changing his front, and proceeding with another wile.

Sanballat finding the uselessness of these attacks from without, sought, in the next place, to conspire against Nehemiah from within. "Afterward," says Nehemiah, "I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple,

and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee." (v. 10.) Nehemiah, as the reader will perceive, was the one obstacle to the enemy's success, and thus the object of all his hatred. For amid general unfaithfulness he was faithful—sustained in his path by the grace of his God; and on this very account it was that he found the path a lonely one. Enemies without, he knew there were; but now he has to discover that professed friends were amongst his foes. He followed therefore, at however great a distance, in the way trodden by our blessed Lord, whose keenest sorrow, on the side of man, was that one of His own disciples betrayed Him. And mark the spiritual subtlety of this last temptation. Nehemiah had paid, it is evident, a visit of sympathy and friendship to Shemaiah, "who was shut up;" and his friend, seeming to be under great concern for Nehemiah's life, proposed that they should meet, and shut themselves up in the temple for safety, urging that his enemies would come in the night to slay him. It was an appeal to his fears, and one apparently dictated by love and friendship, and sanctified by the holy place in which he was urged to conceal himself. But the tempter again missed his mark; or rather his darts failed to penetrate the invincible faith of this upright and faithful servant. "Should," he said, "such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being, as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in." What is life to a faithful soldier? The place for a soldier to die in is the post of duty. To flee would have been to deny his true character, and to have exposed his followers to the victorious power of the enemy. Through grace Nehemiah was not one to turn his back to the foe in the day of battle; and he thus met the solicitations of his "friend"

by resolutely declining his proffered advice. (Compare Ps. lv. 12-14.)

And it is a remarkable thing, that the moment Nehemiah refused the temptation, he perceived the whole character of the enemy's designs, and, piercing through all his disguises, discovered the evil and hypocrisy that were at work to entrap his feet. It is ever so. We are only blinded as long as the temptation is unresisted; when it is refused, all concealment is gone, and Satan stands out fully disclosed. Nehemiah thus says, "And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. Therefore was he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me." (*vv.* 12, 13.) This, then, was the secret; the enemy's gold had corrupted the prophets of God, who warned Nehemiah in the Lord's name when He had not sent them. They could not serve God and mammon; for the moment they took a bribe from the latter they were bound hand and foot at his service, besides disqualifying themselves as the Lord's messengers. And what grief of heart it must have been to the faithful Nehemiah to detect the corrupting influences of the adversary within the holy circle of God's people, amongst those who should have been the mouthpiece of God to His servants. What a contrast to what we read in Ezra: "And with them" (Zerubbabel and Jeshua building the house of God) "were the prophets of God helping them." These prophets—those of the time of Nehemiah—were helping the enemy, not the Lord's work. Alas! how often has it been so since that day, that those who have occupied the place of prophets, those who profess to be the communicators of God's mind to their

fellows, have been in the pay and service of Satan. Even to-day the most subtle opponents of the truth of God and of building the wall of separation, under the plea of the brotherhood of all men, are found in the pulpits of Christendom.

And what was the object of Shemaiah, the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets? To ruin the character of the leader of God's people. They desired to make him afraid, by destroying his trust in God, and thus to lead him into sin, "that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me." This one faithful man, as we have before remarked, was the object of all the assaults and artifices of Satan; around his feet the most subtle snares were spread, because if he could but be worsted and overcome, the victory was assured. At this moment, as far as revealed, the cause of God in Jerusalem depended upon the courage and fidelity of Nehemiah; and hence it was that Satan sought to circumvent him in every possible way. But though wave after wave dashed against him, he stood, by the grace of God, like a rock; and, unmoved by open opposition, his feet were also kept, although pitfalls were dug for him on every hand. God sustained His servant through that uprightness, integrity, and perseverance which are produced alone by a single eye, and by the maintenance of conscious dependence upon divine power. Once again therefore the plot failed.

The secret of Nehemiah's strength is shown in the next verse (14). Having unfolded the aims of the prophets, who had been hired by the enemy, he looks upward, and says, "My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets that would have put

me in fear." Avoiding all open conflict as useless, he commits the matter to God, like Paul, who says, "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works." (2 Tim. iv. 14.) It would be well for us to pay especial attention to these examples. There are many forms of evil which cannot be openly assailed without damage to ourselves and to others, and many evil-workers in the church of God that must be left alone. To attack them would only serve the cause of the enemy; but our resource in such circumstances is to cry to God against them. So also we read in Jude that "Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee." (v. 9.) May the Lord give us more discernment that we may know how to "behave ourselves wisely" in our spiritual conflicts.

The reader will remark that, though this chapter is devoted to the exposure of the enemy's stratagems, the work of building the wall was in nowise hindered. The faith and courage of Nehemiah never faltered; and though he has been led to give, for our instruction, a detailed account of the wiles of Satan, we now find that the building must have been pressed forward with undiminished zeal; for he says, "So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days." "So" is a remarkable word in this connection. It might mean "in this manner," or "notwithstanding," or "in spite of," according as we take it in its literal or spiritual sense. The rapidity of the execution of the work is a testimony to the energy of the workmen under the guidance of Nehemiah; for "the city was large and great," and to surround it with a wall in fifty-two days was

no mean accomplishment, though easily understood when it is remembered that the work was of God, and for God, and that He wrought with the builders. Even the adversaries of Israel were compelled to own this to themselves; for Nehemiah tells us, "And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God." (v. 16.) They had been so far utterly discomfited, and now, as they "heard" and "saw" that the wall was completed, their hopes were dashed to the ground; for this wall—the safety and security of God's people as long as they maintained it in holiness—was an invincible barrier to the foe. This they knew, and hence "they were much cast down in their own eyes." Surely this description is a shadow of the time of which the Psalmist speaks: "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is known in her palaces for a refuge. For, lo, the kings were assembled, they passed by together. They saw it, and so they marvelled; they were troubled, and hasted away. Fear took hold upon them there, and pain, as of a woman in travail." (Ps. xlviii. 2-6.)

The last three verses of the chapter are taken up with a description of another form of evil, with which Nehemiah had to contend, in the midst of God's people. Now the action proceeded not from Tobiah, but from the nobles of Judah. Evil, shut out by the completion of the wall, now springs up within, and seeks to link itself with the evil without. The nobles of Judah entered into correspondence with Tobiah; and indeed they were "sworn unto him," for he was connected with them by a double tie. "He was the son-in-law of Shechaniah the

son of Arah ; and his son Johanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah." (*vv.* 17, 18.) They had therefore allied themselves with an Ammonite, upon whom the curse of God rested (*chap.* xiii. 1), in direct disobedience to the word of God (*Deut.* vii. 3), whereby they also denied the truth of the special place they occupied as the people He had chosen for and separated unto Himself. This has been the continual source of weakness and corruption among the people of God ; for the moment any, like these nobles, enter into relationships with the world, they must be opposed to the ground of separation, on which they have been set. Nay, more ; for James says, "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God ? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God." (*James* iv. 4.) Solemn but true words. These nobles of Judah were thus the enemies of God, as are all such who *desire* to be the friends of the world. And mark how they immediately lost all sense of the distinction between God's people and His enemies ; for we read that "they reported his" (*Tobiah's*) "good deeds before" Nehemiah, and he says they "uttered my words to him." As if good deeds could be done by an enemy of the people of God ! They were seeking to prove, as so many do in the present day, that there is no difference after all between saints and men of the world—that the actions of both are alike good. But what did they thereby prove ? That they themselves had no conception of what was suited to a holy God, and that they, in their own souls, were on the ground of those who knew him not. What wonder was it that, with such confederates inside the city, Tobiah renewed his attempts upon Nehemiah—sent letters to put him in fear ?

We thus see that this devoted man of God had no rest, that he had to wage perpetual warfare against foes within and foes without, but that, single-handed as he was, strengthened by his faith in God, he was superior to all the power of the foe. It is a wonderful record, and one that abundantly proves the all-sufficiency of God to sustain His servants, whatever their difficulties or perils, in any service to which He calls them. To Him alone be all the praise !

CHAPTER VII.

THERE are two things in this chapter—First, the government of Jerusalem, of the city of God, together with provision for continual vigilance against the practices of the enemy (*vv.* 1-4); and secondly, the reckoning of the people by genealogy. (*vv.* 5-73.)

We learn from verse 1 that the doors had now been set up "upon the gates" (see chapter vi. 1), and that everything in connection with the walls had therefore been finished. (Chapter vi. 15.) Following upon this, "the porters, and the singers, and the Levites were appointed"—a most interesting notice thus briefly indicated. The porters, it is almost needless to say, were the doorkeepers, on whom devolved the responsibility of admitting only such as had a lawful claim to enter the city, and of keeping out all who could not show the necessary qualification to be inside; in a word, they had authority over the opening and the shutting of the doors. They held a most important post, even as do also the doorkeepers of the present day. For while it is true, and must ever be insisted on, that every believer—every member of the body of Christ—has his place, for example, at the Lord's table, the "doorkeepers" of the assembly have the responsibility of asking for the production of the evidence that they are what they claim to be. (See Acts ix. 26, 27; 1 Peter iii. 15.) Laxity or neglect in this respect has been productive of the most serious consequences in many an assembly, amounting in some cases to the destruction

of all testimony for Christ, and leading to the positive dishonour of His blessed name. It is a matter therefore of the utmost consequence that only faithful and trusted men should do the work of "doorkeepers," especially in a day of common profession, when all alike claim to be Christians.

There were also "singers." Their employment may be gathered from another place. "These are they," we read, "whom David set over the service of song in the house of the Lord, after that the ark had rest. And they ministered before the dwelling-place of the tabernacle of the congregation with singing, until Solomon had built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem; and then they waited on their office according to their order." (1 Chron. vi. 31, 32.) The Psalmist alludes to these when he says, "Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee." (Ps. lxxxiv. 4.) Such was the occupation of the singers—praising the Lord "day and night" (1 Chron. ix. 33); a shadow of the perpetual employment of the redeemed in heaven (Rev. v.); a blessed service (if service it may be called) which it is the privilege of the Church to anticipate on earth while waiting for the return of our blessed Lord. (See Luke xxiv. 52, 53.) Lastly, there were Levites. Of their work it is said, "Their brethren also the Levites were appointed unto all manner of service of the tabernacle of the house of God." (1 Chron. vi. 48.) The gates and doors having been set up, and porters set in their appointed places, the Lord's portion is first thought of in the singers; and then come the Levites to perform the necessary service in connection with His house. The very order of the mention of these three classes is thus instructive, and shows, at the same time, how jealous Nehemiah was of the Lord's claims upon His

people, and how carefully he sought, in his devotedness to the Lord's service, to acknowledge His supremacy, and to yield to Him the honour due unto His name.

These things having been arranged, he says, "I gave my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the ruler of the palace, charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man, and feared God above many." (*v.* 2.) It is not clear, from the words themselves, whether this description applies to Hanani or Hananiah; but we judge it is to the former, for it will be remembered that it was this same Hanani who was used, with others, to bring the intelligence of the state of the remnant and of Jerusalem, which became, in the hands of God, the means of Nehemiah's mission. (*Chap.* i.) Understanding it so, nothing could more distinctly show Nehemiah's singleness of eye in his Master's service. Hanani was his brother, but he appointed him to this post, not because he was his brother, or a man of influence, but because "he was a faithful man, and feared God above many." In such ways, as well as by the divine directions furnished through the apostle Paul, the Lord teaches us what should characterize those who take the lead among His people; and especially those who occupy places of prominence or care in government. It is not enough that they are men of gift, or position, or influence; but they should be faithful—faithful to God and to His truth, and they should be distinguished by fearing, not men, but God, acting as in His sight, and upholding the authority of His word.

Nehemiah himself gave instructions for the exercise of vigilance and care over the city. First, the gates were not to be opened until the sun was hot. As long as darkness reigned, or any semblance of it, the gates were to be shut against "the rulers of the darkness of this world" (*Eph.* vi.),

for the night is ever the time of their greatest activity. As a contrast, we read of the heavenly Jerusalem that "the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there" (Rev. xxi. 25.); *i.e.* they shall stand perpetually open, because evil and the powers of evil will have for ever passed away. Then, "while they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar them." The porters were not to leave their posts, or delegate their duties to others, but they themselves "standing by" were to see that the doors were both shut and barred. Many a house has been rifled because the shut door has not been "barred," and many a soul has permitted the enemy to gain an entrance because its several "doors" have not been made secure. It was not enough, therefore, since the enemy was in question, that the doors of the gates of Jerusalem should be shut; they must also be barred if the enemy was to be kept outside. We learn from this the imperative necessity of guarding the doors, whether of the soul or of the assembly. In the last place, they were to "appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, every one in his watch, and every one to be over against his house." Two things of the greatest moment are here indicated. The first is, that not a single inhabitant of Jerusalem was exempted from the responsibility of exercising watchfulness over the interests of the city. Every one was to be in his watch. The watch was to be duly ordered, and all were to serve in their turn. Secondly, every one was to maintain the watch over against his own house; that is, to sum up the two things, all were concerned in keeping watch over the whole city, *but the safety of the city was ensured if each kept watch over against his own house.* This is evident, for if the head of every household kept the enemy—evil—out of his house, Jerusalem would be preserved in sepa-

ration unto God. The whole city was necessarily what its several inhabitants made it. Would that this truth were apprehended in the church of God! The assembly, like Jerusalem, is composed of individuals, of many heads of houses, whatever the intimate bond of union subsisting between the members of the body of Christ; and its state, its public state (if this term is permissible), is simply the state of all. If therefore discipline for God is not maintained in the home, neither can it be in the church. Laxity in the one sphere produces laxity in the other. Worldliness in the one place will be worldliness also in the other. Hence the apostle writes, for example, that a bishop must be "one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" (1 Tim. iii. 4, 5.) It would indeed savour of the boldest presumption for one whose own house was in disorder to arrogate to himself a place of rule in the assembly, and it would at the same time introduce the very evils of which his household was the theatre. If, on the other hand, the injunction of Nehemiah be attended to—each keeping watch and ward over his own house—the assembly would be the display of order, security, and holiness to the glory of God.

Next follows a note concerning the city itself. "Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded." This is undoubtedly a testimony of failure. The work of God for that day was building the walls of the city, and this, as we have seen, had been accomplished through the faith and perseverance of Nehemiah, spite of difficulties of every kind. The truth of God would therefore now be bound up with the maintenance of the wall, and the first

three verses reveal to us the provision made for that end. But Nehemiah now informs us that though the city was large and great, the people were few therein. Now the testimony for any given day gathers—indeed, true testimony always gathers—to Him from whom it proceeds as its centre. Very few then had been gathered to that which went forth through Nehemiah. The trumpet had been blown for the calling of the assembly (Numbers x.), and through grace some had responded to its summons; but the mass of the people, as at the commencement of Haggai's ministry, were absorbed in their own things rather than the things of Jehovah. (See Philippians ii. 21.) Moreover "the houses were not builded" of those that were gathered. This first responsibility had been neglected, and would be therefore a perpetual source of mischief. When the children of the captivity first returned they began to build their own houses to the neglect of the Lord's house; and now when the time had come to build their own houses they neglected this. Such is man and such are the people of God, for when walking as men they are never in communion with the Lord's mind. They that are in the flesh, and the principle applies to the Christian if he is governed by the flesh, cannot please God. If any enquire how in the present day their houses are to be builded, Ephesians v. 22, vi. 1-9; Colossians iii. 18, iv. 1 will answer the question. It is to establish the Lord's authority over every member of them, and especially to bring up the children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Now that Nehemiah had given the necessary instructions for guarding the city from the intrusion of evil, he proceeds to the ordering of the people. But he is careful to relate that it was not his own thought. He says, "And

my God put into mine heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy." (v. 5.) This gives us a glimpse into the intimacy of his walk with God. It is "my" God, the one he knew as such in that relationship to himself, which faith and experience alone can recognize (compare 1 Chron. xxviii. 20, xxix. 2, 3; Phil. iv. 19); and it is the One in whose presence he so constantly dwelt, that he could instantly discern the thought which He put within his heart. And the object in view was to examine the title of the people to be in the place where they were. With the constant commerce going on between them and the enemy, and the alliances they had formed in forgetfulness that the Lord had chosen them out of all the peoples on the earth as His peculiar people, there would doubtless be many who could not show their genealogy, and hence had no claim to be numbered with Israel. Now that the wall was built, and the truth therefore of separation proclaimed, such a mixture within could no longer be tolerated. Those who occupied this holy ground, and claimed the blessed privileges of God's house, must have an indefeasible title, and this is the meaning of this next step of Nehemiah. The work in his case was not difficult, for he "found a register of the genealogy of them which came up at the first," etc. (vv. 5, 6 *et seq.*); and by this register it was easy to ascertain whether those within the sacred enclosure of the rebuilt walls or those who might seek admission were all of Israel.*

* As the significance of this register of the genealogy of the people has been already given in our exposition of Ezra ii., it is not necessary to repeat it here. The reader is therefore referred to it to aid him in the understanding of the rest of this chapter, for, as will be perceived, Nehemiah vii. 6-73 is the repetition of Ezra ii.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEFORE entering upon this interesting chapter, it may be profitable to point out the place it occupies. Chapter vi. gives the completion of the wall ; chapter vii. the provision and means for the security of the city, and the reckoning of the people by genealogy ; and in chapter viii. 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 could keep them in the place into which they had been brought, but obedience to the Word ; 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 vii., Ezra ii. ; and the first verse of this chapter is in exact correspondence with Ezra iii. 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. xxiii. 24 ; Numbers xxix. 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 ; and 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.” 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,* 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.

* We quote the words of another. “ It was really the trumpet of God, although the people were unconscious of it, that gathered them to the new moon, which shone again in grace, whatever might be the clouds that veiled its feeble light.”

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 into classes, no teaching apart of men, women, or children, 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 "intreated 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;" *i.e.*, 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*" (xxvi. 26), whereas in Luke we read that "He took bread, and gave thanks." (xxii. 19.) It is thus clear that "bless," when used in this way, has the significance of thanksgiving. (See also 1 Cor. xiv. 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 word "to bless," in the endeavour 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," 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 xx. 17; Heb. x. 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 on the hearts of His people with power, and hence it was that their very attitude expressed their hallowed reverence.* They stood while Ezra prayed, and then, together with their responses of "Amen, Amen," with uplifted hands, they worshipped 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,

* In a state of spiritual barrenness and declension the people of God, it may often be noticed, assume positions of bodily ease during praise or prayer; but the moment there is the display of the Spirit's power all this is changed, and those who are most under His influence will immediately adopt the posture (either kneeling or standing) which most exhibits what is suited to the presence of God.

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. xiii. 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; and secondly, 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 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 lxxxi. 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 (chapter ix.) ; 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 con-

dition; 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 was it 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 exhortations 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 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 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 Leviticus xxiii. that the day appointed for this feast of tabernacles was the fifteenth day of the seventh month, so that a thirteen 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, everyone 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* iii.), 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. xxiii. 40-43.)

If the reader will consult Leviticus xxiii., 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 as yet was 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.*

* It has been often remarked, that while the passover has had its antitype in the cross, and Pentecost in the descent of the Holy Ghost, the feast of tabernacles has had no fulfilment. The reason of this is, as stated above, that it sets forth the end of God's ways with Israel; and this has not yet been reached. Moreover, Christ is now hidden; when the fulfilment of the feast of tabernacles arrives, He will show Himself to the world. (See John vii.)

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 Leviticus xxiii. 36.) In the early days of Ezra (chap. iii.) restoration of the sacrifices marked the observance of this feast; but here the re-establishment of the authority 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 iii.; 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 towards 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 labour fervently in

prayers for the saints that they might stand perfect and complete in *all* the will of God. (See Col. iv. 12.)

The seven days of the feast having been completed, there was "a solemn assembly according to 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 hath 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 vii. 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 the 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 i. 11.)†

* For the details of the observance of this day, as indeed for the whole feast, see Numbers xxix. 2-39.

† It is a remarkable thing that neither in Ezra nor in Nehemiah, though in both cases they kept the feast of trumpets and the feast of tabernacles, is there any mention of the observance of the day of atonement which fell to be kept on the tenth day of the seventh month; *i.e.*, between the two feasts above named.

CHAPTER IX.

THE feast of tabernacles had been observed, and there had been "very great gladness." The last day—the eighth—would fall on the twenty-third day of the month, and thus chapter ix. opens with the day following. Under the searching power of the words of the law the people had wept, but they were told, "This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep." Now, however, that the days of the festival had run their course, the time had come for the expression of their sorrow—that sorrow, according to God, which worketh repentance—and thus it was that, on "the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them." (v. 1.) The entrance of God's word had given them light, and had shown them the character of their past ways, had set even their secret sins in the light of God's countenance; and, smitten in heart and conscience because of their transgression, they were gathered together with all these outward marks of contrition and humiliation. Blessed effect of the word of God, and the beginning of all true recovery and blessing!

And the reality of their sorrow for their sins was proved by their acts: "And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers." There is a reason for the introduction in this place of the word *seed*. It is to point out that they were a holy people separated unto God, as born of His people Israel who had been redeemed to

Himself on the ground of the blood of the Passover Lamb. They were therefore a "holy seed" (Ezra ix. 2; compare 1 John iii. 9), and as such were to maintain their holy character. It was therefore a denial of the place into which they had been brought to "join affinity" with strangers, as well as to break down the barriers which God Himself had set up between them and other peoples. This they now felt, and accordingly they "separated themselves from all strangers." No doubt it was narrowness according to man's thoughts, and in so doing they would surely incur the imputation of uncharitableness; but what did this matter, as long as they were acting according to God? If God sets the feet of His people in a narrow path, it is their part to keep in it if they would be in the path of blessing.

In the next place they "stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers." And remark that separation preceded confession. Shown by the word that they had sinned in associating themselves with strangers, they acted upon what they saw, and then confessed their guilt before God. This is ever God's order. The moment we see that anything we have allowed, or are in association with, is condemned by the word of God, it behoves us to refuse or to separate ourselves from it. No circumstances in such a case can justify delay. Like the Psalmist, we should "make haste and delay not to keep God's commandments." To confess our sin while cleaving to it is but mockery. They also confessed the iniquities of their fathers, and they did so because the Lord's hand had been upon them on this very account. It was owing to the sins of their fathers that they had suffered captivity in Babylon, and that they now, though restored through the tender mercy of God to their own land, were in bondage

to a Gentile monarch. Hence they went down to the root of all the evil, and told out before God their fathers' sins as well as their own. Their humiliation, therefore, on this day was no mere superficial work; but standing before Jehovah, in the light of His presence, they desired to lay bare all the sin and the iniquity on account of which they had suffered chastisement.

In verse 3 we have the details of their occupation in this solemn assembly: "They stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the Lord their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the Lord their God." The Jewish day was composed of four periods of three hours, commencing at six in the morning. They therefore read the Scriptures three hours, and confessed and worshipped three hours. And in what more blessed occupation could they be engaged? Surely they were divinely taught and divinely led in this matter; and by the very fact of its having been recorded, are we not shown the true method of recovery and restoration in seasons of declension or backsliding? Would that the Lord's people everywhere knew how to gather themselves together in a similar manner, seeking grace to separate themselves from all known iniquity, to confess their sins, to search the Word for light and guidance, and to humble themselves before God! Complaints of coldness and indifference, of insensibility to our real condition, are heard on every hand; and together with this, signs of abounding iniquity, through the power of Satan, are everywhere apparent. Behold, then, in the example of these children of the captivity, the divine remedy, the true way of a real revival. There may be in some places but two or three who feel the present evils; but let these two or three get together to

test themselves, and all else, by the Word, and to confess their sins and the sins of their fathers and brethren, and they would soon rejoice in God's interposition and deliverance. Our want of power in this direction is but an evidence of the greatness of our failure; and even if we did but confess our want of power to pray, it would be the dawning of hope in many an assembly. May the Lord stir up the consciences of His beloved people, and may He grant that ere long there may be witnessed in many a place the spectacle of His saints assembling in true contrition of heart, and trembling at the word of God, for humiliation and confession before Him.

The remainder of the chapter (*vv.* 4-38) contains the confession, or at least a portion of it, made on behalf of the people. First, the Levites, Jeshua, and Bani, etc., "stood up upon the stairs . . . and cried with a loud voice unto the Lord their God. Then the Levites, Jeshua, and Kadmiel," etc., said to the people, "Stand up, and bless the Lord your God for ever and ever;" and then, turning from the people to God, they commenced their praise and confession. The reader will remark, that this outpouring of their hearts before God is a recitation of God's ways of grace with His people, combined with the confession of their own continual sin and hardness of heart. On God's part there had been nothing but grace, mercy, and long-suffering, and on their part nothing but sinful ingratitude and rebellion; and thus they justified Him, and condemned themselves—the sure mark of a work of grace in repentance, whether in the hearts of saints or sinners. It will be instructive to examine this remarkable prayer.

They ascribe, first of all, blessing and praise to the glorious name of their God, and, at the same time, acknowledge that He was exalted above it all. They own

His absolute supremacy. (*v.* 5.) In the next place, they adore Him as the Creator; not merely recognizing the creatorship of God, but that JEHOVAH was the CREATOR. "Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven," etc. (*v.* 6.) The difference is important. There are many, for example, who, willing to own that God was the Creator, would hesitate to confess of the Lord Jesus Christ, that "all things were made by Him; and without Him was not any thing made that was made." The natural man might acknowledge the former; but only a true believer could own the latter. They then pass on to God's action in grace in calling out Abram, and in making "a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites," etc.; and they add, "Thou hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous." (*vv.* 7, 8.) What a resting-place they had found for their souls, even in the faithfulness and righteousness of their God! They had learnt that if they believed not, "He abode faithful: He could not deny himself." (2 Tim. ii. 13.) Peter in his second epistle celebrates the same thing, writing "to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." (Chap. i. 1.) There is nothing that a sinner fears more than the righteousness of God, but for the saint it is the immutable foundation on which his soul reposes in perfect peace now that, through the death and resurrection of Christ, grace reigns through righteousness; and hence it is that he can rejoice also in the faithfulness of God, knowing that what He has promised He will also perform. This utterance—"Thou hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous"—is therefore most significant. (Compare Deut. xxvi. 3.)

Redemption is their next theme. (*vv.* 9-11.) And observe how it is traced down from the heart of God. For where

do they commence? It is, "Thou didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt." These are almost the very words that God Himself employed when He first commissioned Moses. "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt." (Exodus iii. 7.) They thus reached the source whence the blessed streams of grace had flowed; and they proceed, after adding, "and heardest their cry by the Red Sea"—another manifestation of the heart of God—to narrate His wonder-working power in judgment "upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land; for thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them. So didst thou get thee a name, as it is this day." (v. 10.) They then speak of the passage through the Red Sea, where God "threw" their persecutors "into the deeps, as a stone into the mighty waters." They thus recall their redemption by power out of the land of Egypt, and thereon speak of the cloudy pillar, and the pillar of fire wherewith Jehovah had led them through the wilderness; for, in truth, He who had redeemed His people out of the hand of Pharaoh, led them forth in His mercy, and guided them in His strength unto His holy habitation. (See Exodus xv. 13.) Next, they recite before the Lord His coming down upon Sinai, the giving of the law, His holy sabbath, the precepts, statutes, and laws which He commanded them by the hand of Moses; and they remind themselves of the bread from heaven which He gave them for their hunger, of the water which He brought forth out of the rock for their thirst, and of the land which He had promised them for a possession. (vv. 13-15.)

So far, it is a tale of grace—of a giving God. He had chosen Abraham, redeemed His people, guided, spoken to, and sustained them. All had been given from the heart

of God—in His own pure and sovereign grace. They turn, in the next place, to their side of the picture. And what a contrast, as it ever is, when the heart of man is put side by side with the heart of God! What then had they to tell of themselves in the presence of all this mercy and grace? *Not one single good thing*; for they say, “But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks,” etc. (*vv.* 16, 17.) They confessed, in a word, pride, stubbornness, wilful disobedience, forgetfulness of the displays of God’s power in their midst, and apostasy. On God’s side there had been mercy, long-suffering, and tender care; and on theirs, ingratitude, and almost every form of evil and corruption.

And yet they have more to tell of the inexhaustible goodness of the God who had redeemed them, borne them on eagles’ wings, and brought them unto Himself. “But thou,” they say, “art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not;” and, moreover, they have further to say, as they magnify the grace of their God, that though their fathers had made a molten calf as their god, ascribing even to it their deliverance from Egypt, “and had wrought great provocations; yet thou, in thy manifold mercies, forsookest them not in the wilderness.” No; God had still guided them by His pillar of cloud by day, and His pillar of fire by night. He gave them His good Spirit, withheld not His manna, nor the water out of the rock; but for forty years He sustained them in the wilderness, so that they lacked nothing; “their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not.” Moreover, He subdued kingdoms before them, multiplied their children, put them into the land which He had promised to their fathers, gave them victory over all the power of the enemy, and

enabled them to take strong cities and a fat land, to possess "houses full of all goods, wells digged, vineyards, and oliveyards, and fruit trees in abundance: so they did eat, and were filled, and became fat, and delighted themselves in thy great goodness." (*vv.* 19-25.) They celebrate in this manner the unchanging goodness of their faithful God, and measure by it the conduct of their fathers and themselves. For what response did they render to all this grace? "Nevertheless," they say, "they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets, which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations." (*v.* 26.) The reader will remark the repetition of this last clause. "They had wrought great provocations" both in the wilderness (*v.* 18) and in the land.

This was what God found in the people He had redeemed as the answer to all His patient grace and goodness; and henceforward a change is marked in God's dealings with them, for they next proceed to narrate His judgments upon His people, yet confessing that He was ever ready to interpose for their succour and deliverance. "Thou deliveredst them into the hand of their enemies, who vexed them: and in the time of their trouble, when they cried unto thee, thou heardest them from heaven; and according to thy manifold mercies thou gavest them saviours, who saved them out of the hand of their enemies." Again, they tell of sin and evil. "Yet when they returned, and cried unto thee, thou heardest them from heaven; and many times didst thou deliver them according to thy mercies." (*vv.* 27, 28.) To these interpositions in grace, in answer to His people's cry, were added testimony against them, forbearance and warnings by prophets, "yet they

dealt proudly, and hearkened not unto thy commandments . . . and withdrew the shoulder, and hardened their neck, and would not hear: therefore gavest thou them into the hand of the people of the lands." (*vv.* 29, 30.)

Such were the causes of their present condition; but they add to the praise of their God: "Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God." Again we say, What a tale! It is, as before said, the revelation of the heart of God and of the heart of man; but, alas! it is the revelation of the heart of man under divine culture, the object of sovereign mercy and love. Jehovah had been seeking fruit from His fig-tree all these centuries, and by His own people's confession He found none; and yet, with unwearying grace, He had borne with them in His infinite longsuffering and patience; and the age to come will tell out even more fully the depths of His mercy towards His beloved people, when, spite of all that they have been and are, and notwithstanding they have forfeited all by their sin and apostasy, He will restore them once again to their land, and maintain them in it in the perfection of blessing under the reign of their Messiah. Such are the counsels of His grace already disclosed in and through the death of Christ — counsels which Christ Himself will accomplish in power when He appears in glory, to take the kingdom of His father David, and to wield His sceptre from the river to the ends of the earth.

Having passed in review the history of God's ways with them since the call of Abram, they now present their prayer. Indeed their rehearsal of the past may be said to be the foundation of their special petition, for they have grounded themselves upon the immutable character of

their God, as "gracious and merciful," according to the revelation He had made of Himself after the sin of the golden calf. (See Exodus xxxiv. 6.) They had owned that they deserved nothing but judgment, and had therefore confessed that they had no hope but in God Himself. They had thus reached an immovable foundation on which to rest their plea—the heart of their God.

And what was their petition? They say, "Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, *let not all the trouble seem little before thee*, that hath come upon us, on our kings . . . and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day." (v. 32.) Such was their prayer. It was the presentation of their own sorrowful condition under the chastising hand of their God, leaving it, as it were, to Him (for they knew that they deserved nothing but judgment) to deal with them according to His own character as "a gracious and merciful God." For they proceed to say, "Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly." (v. 33.) And again, in their utter abasement before God at this moment, they confess the sins of their kings, their princes, their priests, and their fathers, owning that they had not kept the law, that they had not hearkened unto His commandments and His testimonies, and that, even in the kingdom which He had given them, as well as the large and fat land, they had not served Him, nor turned from their wicked works. (v. 35.) They describe, furthermore, their present position in the land; and surely, in contrast with the past, it is a touching picture, and one, as delineated by the Holy Spirit, that could not fail to awaken a response in the heart of Him to whom it was presented. They are servants, they say, and instead of

eating the fruit and the good of the land which God had given their fathers, they were servants in it, and its increase went to the kings, whom God had set over them because of their sins, and these also had dominion over their bodies and their cattle "at their pleasure, and we are in great distress."

Such is the way in which these children of the captivity poured out their sorrows before Jehovah. They justify God in all His dealings with them, and they magnify His grace, mercy, and long-suffering towards them. They take also the place of true self-judgment, for they vindicate God against themselves, not seeking in any one thing to extenuate their own conduct. No, He was just in all that was brought upon them: He had done right, and they had done wickedly. In such a place—a place which it ever behoves sinners, and saints, too, when they have sinned, to take—and in such a dispensation their only refuge was in the mercy of their God. And it was upon this that they cast themselves—unreservedly cast themselves—admitting again and again that they had no claim except indeed upon what God was towards them. And well would it have been if they had left themselves there, if they had rested alone upon their merciful and gracious God. But they went further, and they say, "Because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it." (*v.* 38.) The question, however, of the covenant which they made belongs really to the next chapter; for it is there we find its terms, and what the people with their leaders solemnly engaged to perform.

CHAPTER X.

AT the close of the last chapter a covenant is made, and at the commencement of this the names are given of those that sealed it; that is, of those who bound themselves to its observance by their signatures, but subscribing their names, it would seem, not only for themselves, but also on behalf of the people. Nehemiah, as the governor, was the first to put his name to this solemn document; he was followed by twenty-two priests (*vv.* 1-8), then came seventeen Levites (*vv.* 9-13), after whom there were forty-four chiefs of the people, probably heads of families.

The nature of the covenant is seen in what follows: "And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding; they clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our God, and His judgments and His statutes." (*vv.* 28, 29.) There can be no doubt that there was a general movement in the hearts of the people, and that this covenant-making was no mere formal act; for while the "nobles" had signed it on behalf of all, there was an evident concurrence in their deed from the fact of all classes coming spontaneously forth to ratify

what was done. Even the wives and children, at least those who had knowledge and understanding, participated in the act and deed.

And what was it, let us enquire more particularly, that they engaged to do? The very thing that Israel had undertaken when standing before Sinai, where, under the sanction of the sprinkled blood, they solemnly said, "All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient." (Exodus xxiv.) Up to that time, since their redemption from the land of Egypt, they had been under grace. God had borne them on eagles' wings, and brought them unto Himself. Grace had set them free; they were to stand still and see the salvation of God; and grace had sustained, provided for, borne with, and guided them, until that moment. But when they came to Sinai, to bring out what was in their heart, the Lord sent, through Moses, this message to His people, "If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people." (Exodus xix. 3-5.) They accepted the proposed condition, with the penalty of death, as proclaimed by the sprinkled blood, attached to transgression (Exodus xix., xxiv.); and henceforward they were on a new footing and relationship with God. Already they were God's people by redemption; and now, in utter forgetfulness of the history of the three months which had elapsed since they crossed the Red Sea, of their continual sins, they expressed themselves ready to abandon the ground of grace, and to accept that of responsibility. They had sinned at Marah, in the wilderness of Sin, and at Rephidim; and God had borne with them in long-suffering mercy, according to the ground on which He had set them, meeting their murmurings with new displays of His grace, and ever bestrewing their path with fresh

blessings. What folly then to enter into the covenant of law which was proposed to them at Sinai! Had they known themselves, had they understood the past, had they but reflected, they would have said, "Thou in thy mercy, Lord, hast led forth thy redeemed people, thou hast hitherto undertaken all for us, while we have been continually guilty of sin and hardness of heart. We *are* thine, and thou must keep us; for if we are left to ourselves, or if anything is made dependent on us and on our doings, we shall lose everything. No, Lord, we are debtors wholly to thy grace, and to thy grace we must be debtors still." But in their ignorance of their own hearts, in the folly of the flesh, they accepted the covenant with all its solemn sanctions and penalties. And what happened? Before even the tables of the law had reached the camp, they had apostatized from Jehovah, and had made the golden calf, before which they fell down, saying, "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." (Exodus xxxii. 1-4.) Thus having received all under grace, they forfeited everything under responsibility.

Take yet another example. After the reign of wicked Manasseh, who filled Jerusalem with innocent blood "from one end to another," and who "seduced the people to do more evil than did the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the children of Israel," Josiah succeeded to the throne. He was characterized by obedience to the Word, and, in his desire to reclaim the people from their evil ways, he "made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all their heart and all their soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people stood to the

covenant." (2 Kings xxiii. 3.) But even while with their lips they "stood to the covenant," they did it "in falsehood" (Jer. iii. 10, margin), and soon even outwardly were worse than ever.

These examples will enable us to estimate the value of the covenant which Nehemiah, with the people, made at this time. They were not ignorant of the past (chap. ix. 13, 14), and they had confessed the former transgressions of their people; and yet they now make another covenant, blinded by the enthusiasm of the moment to the fact that as their fathers were, so were they, that there was no more probability of their observing these solemn engagements than in the case of their ancestors. And yet they were doubtlessly sincere, fully purposing to be faithful to the obligations they were undertaking. There are few indeed who cannot understand this transaction, for the flesh is naturally legal, and it seems an easy method of providing against failure to make a covenant. God's people have often resorted to this expedient, only to discover their own utter impotence; and thus they have been, in many cases, taught to look to Another for the power they needed instead of to themselves. It is easy to pass condemnation, whether upon Nehemiah or others, but it is better to learn from their example, for it is a necessary stage in the history of souls; and blessed are they who, whether by this or any other process, have come to the end of themselves, have ceased to expect anything from their own promises or efforts, and have learned that in their flesh there dwelleth no good thing, and that while to will is present with them, how to perform that which is good they find not.

There were three main articles in the covenant to which they bound themselves by a curse and an oath. First, they engaged to keep the whole law as given to their fathers at

Sinai, as well as all the Lord's commandments, judgments, and statutes. Secondly, they declared that they would contract no more marriages with the heathen; and, lastly, that the sabbath, the holy days, and the seventh year (see Deut. xv.), with its accompanying conditions, should be faithfully observed. (See Exodus xxi., xxiii., etc.) In addition to this, they made obligatory ordinances to secure provision for the service of the house of God, for the sacrifices, and for all that appertained to their religious observances. Though in weakness, and in bondage to the Gentiles, they desired to order everything connected with Jehovah and His claims according to what had been enjoined upon them in the law of Moses. Every one was, in the first place, to contribute the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of God. As far as can be discovered from the Scriptures, there was no legal precedent for this voluntary assessment. In connection with the erection of the Tabernacle it was ordained that whenever the children of Israel should be numbered, "everyone that passeth among them that are numbered" should give half a shekel, "to make an atonement for your souls;" and this money was to be appointed "for the service of the tabernacle of the congregation; that it may be a memorial unto the children of Israel before the Lord, to make an atonement for your souls." (Exodus xxx. 11-16.) This no doubt suggested the annual contribution before us, lessened probably to a third of a shekel on account of their poverty. (Chap. ix. 32.) In after years it was raised to half a shekel, and became a tax upon every Jew. It was concerning this that the collectors asked Peter, "Doth not your Master pay tribute?" (Matt. xvii. 24-27.)

It is beautiful, whatever the after failure, to see the hearts of these poor returned captives flow out in love to

the house of their God, that He might be honoured, and that they might have their standing before Him through His own ordinances in the sanctuary. Thus the money contributed was to be expended in the provision for the continual shewbread which, composed as it was of twelve loaves, represented the twelve tribes of Israel in association with Christ and before God—God Himself revealed in Christ in association with Israel in the perfection of governmental administration.* From this fund was to be defrayed also the cost of the continual meat-offering, the continual burnt-offering in their appointed seasons, “and for the sin-offerings, to make an atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.” (v. 33.) Every kind of offering—representing Christ in the devotedness of His life, His perfect humanity, Christ in His devotedness unto death for the glory of God, and Christ as the sin-bearer—was to be provided and offered for Israel. The children of the captivity were but few, but they were on the ground of the whole nation before God, and hence they included in their thoughts the whole of Israel, and they showed by caring for the sacrifices that it was only in and by the efficacy of these that this ground could be secured and maintained. This is evidence of divine intelligence, revealing a true appreciation of Jehovah’s claims, as well as of the only possible ground on which they themselves could stand before Him.

They proceeded, in the next place, to “cast the lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for the wood-offering, to bring it into the house of our God, after the houses of our fathers, at times appointed year by year, to burn upon the altar of the Lord our God, as it is

* See, for a detailed exposition of the Table of shewbread, *The Typical Teachings of Exodus*, p. 230.

written in the law." (v. 34.) It was necessary that this provision should be made, for the fire on the altar was never to go out. (See Leviticus vi. 8-13.) On this account they selected priests to attend to the altar, Levites to wait upon the priests in this service, and some of the people to bring the needful supplies of wood for the holy fire. All was to be duly ordered and cared for, "as it is written in the law." They had begun to understand that God's thoughts must govern in God's things. The firstfruits of their ground, and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, were also to be annually brought to the Lord's house. They desired therefore, in accordance with the precepts of the law, to honour the Lord with their substance and with the firstfruits of all their increase, in recognition of Him from whom the increase of the field proceeded, and to whom all belonged. They could not enter, as we can, into the blessed typical teaching of the firstfruits; but Christ as the firstfruits (1 Cor. xv. 23) was before the eye of God, and invested the offerings of His people with all His value and preciousness. (Lev. xxiii. 9-21; see also James i. 18.)

They promised, furthermore, to bring the firstborn of their sons, of their cattle, of their herds and flocks to the house of their God, unto the priests that minister in the house of their God. (See Exodus xiii., and Luke ii. 22-24.) In this they acknowledged themselves as a redeemed people; for when "the Lord slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast," He commanded His people to sacrifice to Him "all that openeth the matrix being males," but gave permission to redeem the firstborn of their children. We thus read, "All the firstborn of the children of Israel are mine, both man and beast: on the day that I smote every

firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them for myself." (Numbers viii. 17.) The restored remnant reverted to this ordinance in the grateful recollection that they had been brought up out of the land of Egypt, and in recognition of what was due to Jehovah their Redeemer.

The last three verses concern the firstfruits and the tithes. The Levites were given unto Aaron, in the place of the firstborn, to be offered "before the Lord for an offering of the children of Israel, that they may execute the service of the Lord." (Num. viii. 11.) All the work of the house of God, except the strictly priestly duties, devolved upon them; and provision was made for their support in the tithes imposed upon the people. Both the priests and the Levites were to be sustained by the offerings of the people—the character of which had all been duly prescribed. (See Num. xviii.) All this is now remembered, and the people, in their zeal for the restoration of the law, charge themselves with the observance of their responsibilities in this matter that the service of the house of their God might be duly established. The firstfruits for the priests, as well as the tithes for the Levites, were to be stored in the chambers of the house. (1 Chron. ix. 26–33.)

It will thus be perceived that the covenant, embracing in its terms all that the people on this day engaged to do, included what was due to God and to His house. They put themselves under the solemn obligation to meet all God's claims upon them personally, to maintain a holy separation from the nations around, to keep the sabbath—the sign of God's covenant with them, etc.; and in addition to this, they undertook the burden of caring for all that appertained to the establishment and support of the service of the Lord's house. They concluded the latter part of the

covenant therefore with the words, "And we will not forsake the house of our God." Nor can we doubt the sincerity of their intentions. Assembled together, they were for the time one in heart and aim, and their common desire and purpose found expression in this covenant. But it is one thing, as all know, to vow, and another to perform. When wrought upon by some mighty influence, which isolates us from everything but the one thing then presented to our souls, it is easy to bind ourselves to pursue that one object for ever. The influence passes away, and, while the object which had been before us seems as desirable as ever, the impulse to its attainment is no longer felt. Together with this loss of power, the flesh reasserts itself, and finally the "covenant" which, at the time we made it, seemed so easy to keep, becomes impossible, and adds another burden to an already bad conscience. All this the Jews will discover in time. Meanwhile they sketched a beautiful covenant which, if duly observed, would produce a perfect state, and they added an attractive resolution not to forsake the house of their God.

CHAPTER XI.

BEFORE entering upon this chapter, it may be helpful to the reader to point out the structure of the book. Up to chapter vii. 5, we have Nehemiah's personal narrative, from the time he first heard of the affliction and reproach of the remnant in Judea, and of the desolate condition of Jerusalem, until the completion of the building of the wall, etc. The remainder of chapter vii. contains "the register of the genealogy of them which came up at the first." The portion included in chapters viii.-x. gives the reading of the law by Ezra, and the effect of it as seen in the confession of sins, and the making a covenant to keep the law and all the observances of the house of God; and this part of the book, if written by Nehemiah, is not written in the first person singular, as in the former part; but it is "we" did this or that. (See chapter x. 30, 32, 34, etc.) Coming now to chapter xi. we find an account of how the people were distributed, both in Jerusalem and in the cities of Judah, with their genealogies; followed in chapter xii. 1-26 by a list of the priests that went up with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and also of the Levites who were recorded chief of the fathers at certain periods. In chapter xii. 27-43 we have the dedication of the wall, and the chapter closes with the appointment of some "over the chambers for the treasures," and with an account of the duties and maintenance of the singers and porters. The last chapter (xiii.) is taken up with a description of the abuses Nehemiah found on his return to Jerusalem, after a visit to the king at Babylon,

and of the vigorous efforts he made for their correction, and this chapter, as well as the ceremony of the dedication of the wall, is written by Nehemiah himself, as it is an account of what he himself saw and did.

Returning again to chapter xi., the first two verses, it will be observed, are distinct—complete in themselves. “The rulers of the people dwelt in Jerusalem.” “The city,” we have before been told, “was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded.” (Chapter vii. 4.) In truth it was at this time little else than a desolate heap of ruins; and for the people at large, therefore, there was no means of subsistence. But as it had ever been the seat of authority, and still “the holy city,” the rulers, who would also be men of substance, would naturally fix their abode within its sacred walls; for if they were men of faith, they would view it, not as it actually existed before their eyes, but as it would be in a future day—as “the city of the great King”—and as such “the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth.” Still there was need for people as well as for rulers; and thus “the rest of the people also cast lots to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities.” Besides these there were others “that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem,” and of these, it is said, “the people blessed” them. Those on whom the lot fell went of necessity; but those who willingly offered themselves were moved by their own choice and affection. This spontaneous offering of themselves could only spring from love to the place which God had desired and chosen for His habitation, and was therefore evidence that they had in some measure entered into the mind and heart of God. “They shall prosper,” says the Psalmist, “that love thee”—Jerusalem

—because indeed it showed a heart in communion with the heart of God. So with these men who offered themselves; for it was as precious to Jehovah, albeit He had sent Nebuchadnezzar to level it to the ground, in the day of its desolations as in that of its prosperity and splendour. It was as true in the time of Nehemiah as in that of Solomon, that “the Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob,” and hence it must have been acceptable to Jehovah Himself when these men expressed their desire to dwell at Jerusalem. The people seem to have understood this, for they blessed those who thus came forward. If they had not the energy to do the same thing, they could not help admiring those who had; and, comprehending the privilege they would enjoy, they were constrained to bless them. They might have remembered the words of one of their own psalms—“Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways. . . . Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools. They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.” (Psalm lxxxiv. 5-7.) How often it is seen, even now, that there are believers who can admire the blessedness of devotedness to Christ and His interests without having the heart or courage to pursue the same path for themselves!

In the next place, we have a description of the distribution of the people. (See also 1 Chron. ix. 2-16.) In Jerusalem there were, besides priests and Levites, children of Judah and children of Benjamin (*vv.* 4, 10, etc.); while in the cities there were “Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon’s servants.”* We may briefly glance at the details. Of

* See for an explanation of the last two classes our remarks on Ezra ii.

Judah there were in the holy city "four hundred threescore and eight valiant men"—all "sons of Perez" or Pharez; *i.e.*, they are traced back to the son of Judah, as evidence that they could show their genealogy. Of Benjamin there were nine hundred and twenty-eight. Of these "Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer: and Judah the son of Senuah was second over the city." We find here abundant confirmation of the fact that, apart from the priests and Levites, only the two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, or representatives of these, were brought back from Babylon. That there might have been individual members of other tribes, such, for example, as Anna, who was "of the tribe of Aser" (Luke ii. 36), in nowise affects this statement. As tribes, Judah and Benjamin only were restored; and thus the remaining ten tribes are "lost" to this day, hidden, in the ways of God, among the peoples of the earth; but the time is fast approaching, though it may be not until after the appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, when they will be brought out of their hiding-place, and set in security and blessing in their own land under the peaceful sway of their glorious Messiah. (See Jeremiah xxix. 14, xxxi.; Ezekiel xx. 33-44.)

Attention may also be directed to the care with which the genealogy of the people is stated. This, indeed, is of all-importance to the saints of God, and especially to God's ancient people. For seventy years they had been in Babylon, and knowing ourselves the influence of such a scene, it had been no wonder if they had settled down in the country to which they had been exiled, if, in the pursuits and occupations of their daily lives, they, or at least their children born in Babylon, had forgotten the land of their birth, and ceased to remember Jerusalem above their chief joy, and had lost their nationality by

commingling with the Gentiles. The record of their genealogy shows that they had not done so, that they had continued to prize their descent from Abraham as their chiefest heritage, because it had put them among a people favoured of Jehovah, and in the midst of whom He Himself had dwelt. These, therefore, were not like Esau, who despised his birthright; but they clung to it, amid all their tribulation and reproach, as their divinely given title to all their national expectations and hopes. It is a great thing for saints at any time to preserve the record of their genealogy. The Jew did it by guarding the written testimony to his descent; the Christian can only do so by walking in obedience, in the power of an ungrieved Spirit, who alone can enable us to cry "Abba, Father," and who Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God. Moreover, the presentation of their title was a necessity (see Ezra ii. 59, 62) for the admission of their claim to dwell in the holy city; and as in Ezra so here (and we would emphasize the fact), the responsibility of producing the title rested on those who made the claim. It is well to remember this in a day of profession, when all alike, on the ground of that profession, assert their rights to the most blessed privileges of Christianity, and look upon it as a proof of narrowness and lack of charity, if their demands are not instantly recognized. Many such may be really the children of God; only let it be remembered that on them lies the burden of proving it, and that proving it is an indispensable condition of its acknowledgment.

From verse 10 to verse 14, we have the account of the priests, the genealogy of the chief of whom is also carefully stated. Altogether they numbered eleven hundred and fifty-two. Of these Seraiah was "the ruler of the

house of God," while no less than eight hundred and twenty-two were occupied in the work of the house. This was a blessed privilege, whether for the former or the latter, whatever the responsibilities connected with the respective offices which had been assigned to them in the grace of God. There are "rulers" of the house of God still; but none can rightly fill the post unless they are possessors of the necessary qualifications. (See, for example, 1 Tim. iii. 1-7.) All may now assist in doing the work of the house, if they are living according to their priestly place in the holiest; for the work in this case was that which belonged to them as priests, and only those who are filling their priestly office can rightly be engaged in priestly service.*

The Levites follow the priests (*vv.* 15-18); but altogether they only numbered two hundred fourscore and four. Among these were some who "had the oversight of the outward business of the house of God." Only the priests could minister at the altar, or in the holy places; still the Levites had a blessed place of service. They were originally given to Aaron (Christ) for the service of the tabernacle (Num. iii.), for all the work of the house of God outside of the priestly office. At the present time believers are both priests and Levites; for when they are in the holiest offering through Christ the sacrifice of praise to God, or when they "do good" and "communicate," they are acting as priests (Heb. xiii. 15, 16), and when occupied for the Lord in other kinds of service they exhibit rather the Levitical character. There is indeed the same distinction in the Church of God: bishops—*i.e.*, those

* The reader may study in connection with this subject Rom. xii. 1, xv. 16 (reading, for "ministering the gospel," "carrying it on as a sacrificial service"); Heb. xiii. 15, 16; 1 Peter ii. 5-9, &c.

who answer to these as described in the epistles (1 Tim. iii.; Titus i.)—are rulers in the house of God, corresponding with Seraiah (*v.* 11); while deacons (see Acts vi., &c.) are like these Levites, engaged in the “outward business” of the assembly. Then one is specially mentioned, though others were associated with him, who was ‘the principal to begin the thanksgiving in prayer.’ There is nothing like this in the service of the Levites in the wilderness, for indeed the wilderness was not a place of song or praise; but this office dates from the time of David, who “appointed certain of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, and to record, and to thank and praise the Lord God of Israel.” Thereon we read that “on that day David delivered first this psalm, to thank the Lord, into the hand of Asaph and his brethren.” (1 Chron. xvi. 4–7; also chap. xxv. 1–7.) This will explain why Mattaniah’s (*v.* 17) genealogy is traced back to Asaph, and is at the same time evidence of the care exercised to restore the service of praise “after the ordinance of David king of Israel.” (Ezra iii. 10, and chap. xii. 24.) All this was in harmony with the dispensation which then obtained; but now that the hour has come when the true worshippers worship the Father in Spirit and in truth (John iv. 23), only such as are led of the Holy Spirit can “begin the thanksgiving in prayer.” (Eph. v. 18, 19.)

Besides the Levites, there are mentioned “the porters, and their brethren that kept the gates,” numbering an hundred and seventy-two, and the singers of the sons of Asaph that were “over the business of the house of God.” (*vv.* 19–21.) Parenthetically it is noted that “the residue of Israel, of the priests and Levites, were in all the cities of Judah, every one in his inheritance. But the Nethinims

dwelt in Ophel: and Ziha and Gispa were over the Nethinims." (*vv.* 20, 21.) Without going into particulars, it may be pointed out that all these details are given to show how complete for the moment was the restoration of divine order in the holy things of Jehovah's house amongst these children of the captivity. Man's will had wrought long enough, and now, once more back in the land of their fathers, the land of promise and hope, their one desire is that Jehovah alone should govern—that everything should be in accordance with His word. But in the midst of this beautiful revival, there are remembrances of their sad condition in contrast with the past. Gentile authority is noticed even in connection with the house of God. Thus, after the introduction of the singers of the sons of Asaph, who were over the business of the house of God, it is added, "For it was the king's commandment concerning them, that a certain portion should be for the singers, due for every day. And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabeel, of the children of Zerah, the son of Judah, was at the king's hand in all matters concerning the people." (*vv.* 23, 24.)

It was sad beyond all expression that the singers in the temple of the Lord should be dependent for support upon a Gentile monarch. They were Levites, and it was intended that they should be sustained by the willing-hearted contributions of the people (see Deut. xii. 11, 12; xxvi. 12, 13), forasmuch as they had no part or inheritance with their brethren of the children of Israel. But the people who had returned from Babylon were few in number; they themselves with their cattle were subject to the pleasure of alien rulers; they were servants in the land God had given to their fathers, and altogether were in great distress. (Chap. ix. 36, 37.) It was not possible for them therefore

to provide for these singers ;* and while God in His mercy had given them some reviving in the midst of their bondage, He would have them remember that their present condition was the fruit of their past ways, and that, since it was through the chastenings of His hand that they were subjected to Gentile authority, it was a part of their obedience to His will that it should be acknowledged. Alas ! the sentence of Lo-ammi had been written upon them (Hosea i. 9), though God, being what He was, could not but abide faithful to the covenant which He had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Hence He still loved and watched over the people, for His gifts and calling are without repentance ; but having, on account of their manifold transgressions, transferred His earthly sovereignty to the Gentiles, the people must render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and to God the things that are God's.

It was the position of the people, restored by God's mercy, with the permission of the Gentile authority, and still subject, that rendered it necessary for the king to be acquainted with all the matters that concerned them ; and Pethahiah was at his hand to give the required information—the representative, as it were, of his people. It is a shadow, however feeble, of Him who is at the right hand of God, gone into heaven to appear in the presence of God for us. How blessed for us to remember that there is One at the right hand of God in all matters concerning the people He has redeemed ! One who has undertaken everything for us ; and who is able to save us through all the difficulties and perils of the wilderness, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for us.

* See, however, chap. x. 37 and chap. xii. 44-47. Still the remarks above must stand, as the king's commandment is distinctly referred to. Probably the people failed in this as in all else.

The rest of the chapter comprises a statement of the location of the children of Judah in the different cities and villages, and also of the children of Benjamin. The former dwelt from Beer-sheba unto the valley of Hinnom (*v.* 30); the latter in the several places named; and of the Levites were divisions in Judah and in Benjamin. These notices, of little significance to us, will doubtless be consulted with intense interest by the Jews of a later day.

CHAPTER XII., XIII. 1-3.

THIS chapter is divided into two parts: the first, reaching down to verse 26, dealing with genealogical matters; the second, extending to verse 3 of chap. xiii., 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; *i.e.*, (the reader will remember) those who went up in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia. (See Ezra i., ii.) 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. (*vv.* 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 some commencing and closing with Hallelujah—"Praise ye the Lord." (See Psalms cxlviii.-cl.) 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 Ghost.

In verses 12-21 the names of the chief of the fathers (priests) in the days of Joiakim are recorded. Joiakim was the son of Jeshua. (*v.* 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;" *i.e.*, 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." (*vv.* 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 chap. vii. onwards to chap. xii. 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 chapter vi., 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, &c. ; 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. xii. 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. (*vv.* 27-29.) Next we read, "And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates and the wall." (*v.* 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 (*Johu* xiii.) 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. xxix. 5; xxxv. 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 (Exodus xxx. 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. xix.) 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 ii. 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 (*vv.* 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. xv. 16, 17; xxv. 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 [*i.e.*, 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,” &c., “with trumpets.” (*vv.* 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.” (*vv.* 42, 43.)

* It is impossible to elucidate all these topographical notices. Much time has been expended in conjectures upon this subject; but, after some examination, the only conclusion reached is that nothing certain can be ascertained. No doubt, through recent investigations, much new light has been discovered, and the time may come when the line of Jerusalem’s ancient walls may be redrawn with tolerable accuracy; but at present the reader must be contented to wait, apart from the question whether such a study would tend to any real edification.

† This might mean that those whose employment it was to give thanks in the house of God were, on the present occasion, divided into two companies in connection with the ceremonial observed at the dedication.

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 "troubulous 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. (*vv.* 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.* x.) 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* xx.), 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." (Ephes. v. 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 Ephes. v., vi.), 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 (chap. viii.); and indeed it is a characteristic both of this book and in Ezra (see chap. x.), 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." (*v.* 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 succour 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." (*v.* 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 (Haggai i.), 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 chap. x. 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." (*vv.* 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 Zerubabel, 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. x. 37-39; xiii. 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 for ever," &c. (Deut. xxiii. 3, 4), "they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude." (Chap. xiii. 1-3.) Again and again they had thus separated themselves (Ezra x. ; Nehemiah ix. 2, &c.), 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.

CHAPTER XIII. 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. (*v.* 6.) "Before this" would mean before the separation from the mixed multitude (*v.* 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 (*chaps.* iii. and vi.), 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 every thing 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 x.) The lesson of Nehemiah's mission is therefore the lesson

of every dispensation ; viz., 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 iv. we see the perfect answer to the Lord's prayer, "that they all may be one" (John xvii. 21), for "the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul" (v. 32) ; and then in chapter v. we have the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, and in chapter vi. 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 Timothy i. 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 (chapter xii. 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, re-appeared. 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, &c.—and this chamber was "in the courts of the house of God." (*vv.* 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 and 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 (*v.* 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." (*v.* 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 dishonour 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." (vv. 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." (v. 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 labourers into His harvest, and to care for the souls of His people. But whenever decline sets in, and saints become worldly, labourers are forgotten ; so that those who have not learnt 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 odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God." (Phil. iv. 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. x. 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." (v. 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" (v. 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. viii. 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." (v. 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," &c. (v. 15.) They were also selling victuals, and bought fish and ware of the men of Tyre on the sabbath. (v. 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 (Exodus xvi.; Deut. v. 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." (*vv.* 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 offence 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 task 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. v. 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." (*v.* 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." (*v.* 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.* *xlix.* 4-6.) Nehemiah had in measure learnt 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." (*vv.* 23, 24.) This was the evil that had so deeply afflicted the heart of Ezra (*chap.* *ix.* 1-3), and which he earnestly sought to eradicate; but it had started up again, and confronted Nehemiah also all through his labours

(chap. ix. 2 ; x. 30, &c.) 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 enquired, "hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?" (*vv.* 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 (chap. i. 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 laboured there for years, and at length, through the goodness of God, saw his desire accomplished. But now, together with the close of his labours, 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 labours 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. xxi.), "and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites." (Malachi ii. 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 dishonoured.

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." (Malachi iii. 3.)

Thus end the recorded labours of Nehemiah. He had fully identified himself with the interests of the Lord and with Israel, and he had persevered in his labours 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 labours 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 labour 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 labours, 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!

