
A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

NEHEMIAH.

THE reforms accomplished by Ezra, vigorous as they were, proved to be of brief duration. When the book of Nehemiah opens, and discloses the state of affairs at Jerusalem thirteen years after Ezra's arrival, it is with disappointment the reader perceives that zeal and energy have been spent in vain. Priests and laymen alike have resumed their foreign wives. The walls are still unbuilt. The country round is occupied by hostile bands of Samaritans and Arabs. Ezra himself is no longer governor. When tidings of this lamentable state of matters was brought to Nehemiah, at the court in Shushan, he was so deeply moved that the king could not but notice his altered aspect. Chosen to act as cup-bearer on account of his pleasant appearance, his depressed and anxious expression was all the more readily noticed. He was not like himself. Artaxerxes, on learning the cause of his distress, grants him leave of absence and a commission to build the walls of Jerusalem. This was in the year 446 B.C. Nehemiah's work in Jerusalem, then, naturally falls into two parts. He sheltered the work of Ezra so that it bore its natural fruit; and he accomplished an important work of his own.

Ezra had restored the law to its proper place in the life of the people. He had done so by his own purity of intention, and by the strength of character of one or two of his associates. But how was he to secure for the law the permanent and universal regard of the people? First, he had to ascertain and declare what the law really was. The fact that he brought with him from Babylonia men who were acquainted with the law, and prepared to interpret it, proves that among the Jews of the Captivity there existed copies of the law. In what condition these copies of the law were, we do not know; nor do we know how far we are indebted to Ezra for the condition in which we now have

the books of Moses. It is quite likely that Ezra, during the twelve years subsequent to his arrival at Jerusalem, was busy with his fellow scribes revising these books, collecting and collating such manuscripts as may have survived the demolition of Jerusalem, and multiplying copies. These five books of Moses, in one form or other, were the Bible of Ezra's time, and it was to the law therein contained that the people swore obedience.

But it could scarcely fail to occur to scribes engaged in this work, that it would be an interesting and useful work to collect also all the extant remains of the Hebrew prophets. This however was a much more difficult task. Jeremiah seems to have been careful to secure the preservation of the very words he spoke. But he was apparently an exception. And now centuries have elapsed since some of the prophets had spoken, and during these centuries the land had been trodden and wasted by so many conquering and plundering armies that the wonder is, not that so little, but that so much was found to be extant of the ancient literature. But laborious as the unearthing of these treasures must have been, the task of identifying them must have been more delicate and difficult still; for some of the prophecies survived anonymously. A leaf or two of papyrus, a strip or two of parchment, which might task the sagacity of the keenest critic, was sometimes all that was left. A few sentences, without date or signature, but bearing in their contents proof that they were worthy to be ranked with Isaiah and Hosea—these were what Ezra and his fellow editors had to find a place for. And yet with such integrity and sagacity was the work carried through, that from that day to this it has stood virtually untouched; and, so far as the law and the prophets are concerned, our Bible is the Bible of Ezra and Nehemiah.

But when Ezra had gathered and transcribed in a fair clean copy the books of Moses in the language in which

they had been written, his work was by no means finished; for few of the people could now understand Hebrew. Before the time of the Captivity an Aramaic dialect prevailed among all the tribes of Syria and Mesopotamia down to Babylonia itself. And as the carrying trade was entirely in the hands of these tribes, knowledge of the common tongue in which trade was everywhere carried on was essential. Aramaic thus became what Greek was in the time of the empire, Spanish in South America, French in modern Europe, and what English bids fair to be all the world over. To a people who had forgotten their Hebrew and understood only Aramaic, it was useless to read Moses in his own tongue. Interpreters who understood both languages were therefore appointed by Ezra to "give the sense." This, we are told, was done in the first great gatherings of the people in Jerusalem. And afterwards the same custom spread to the towns and villages. The people, with little in their own condition to glory in, were pleased to hear, Sabbath after Sabbath, the record of their fathers' deeds, and the great history and legislation of primitive times.

And thus, in all probability did the institution of the Synagogue originate. Thus also was begotten the need of educated, trained, professional scribes. And with this class sprang into being many rules for the reading of Scripture, some of them wise, some foolish. Scripture was distributed into three kinds of passages: those which might both be read and interpreted, those which might be read but not interpreted, those which might neither be read nor interpreted. Regard was had to the ignorance of the hearer, and the interpreter was enjoined to explain such expressions as might be misunderstood, and as might convey to the hearer's mind any grossly anthropomorphic idea, or any thought which might lower the true dignity of God.

Lastly, the law had not only to be ascertained and inter-

preted, it had also to be administered. Since first it was given, the circumstances of the people were greatly altered, and there was difficulty in seeing how the old law should be applied to the new condition of things. Questions about inheritance, distribution of land, remission of debts, atonements for various offences, were continually referred to the scribes for their decision. And, as in some other countries, so among the Jews, these decisions and explanations gradually assumed an authority little, if at all, inferior to that of the law itself; so that when the Messiah came to His kingdom He found the law overlaid and buried and choked by a mass of tradition. There was no getting to the naked law through the explanatory matter it had accumulated around it.

Some such work as this was accomplished by Ezra after Nehemiah's arrival at Jerusalem.

Turning to Nehemiah himself, we are first struck with the interest he felt in Jerusalem, and the readiness with which he abandoned his own position in the Persian court and devoted himself to his people. He was young, and he lived among the varied temptations of court life; but under all he carried a heart throbbing with love of his kindred. His own success did not tempt him to neglect as hopeless his less successful fellow countrymen. He was willing to burden and darken his own bright and easy career by uniting himself with inglorious and helpless people. More than this a young man need not do to show he has the root of the matter in him. To break or interrupt one's own career when it is most promising, and to link oneself to the obscure lot of unpromising people, is a noble form of self-sacrifice, and one that is constantly required in society.

Looking a little deeper into the character of Nehemiah, we detect in him a trained conscientiousness, which does not content itself with rejecting temptation, but is quick to recognise duty. He had what some men have in a much

higher degree than others, a sense of the conduct befitting his position. This appears very strikingly when his enemies, Tobias and Sanballat, suborn a prophet to persuade him that he is to be assassinated, and that his only safety lies in taking refuge in the Temple. They knew that if he yielded and fled to the Temple his influence would from that hour be gone. But to the prophet's ill-omened and lugubrious utterances Nehemiah firmly answers: "Should 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." This was not mere bravery, though there was bravery in it. It was the bravery of a man who recognised what was due to his position. It was the feeling which animates many an officer in the army who is gifted with no exceptional physical courage, and who yet, through the instinctive sense of what is expected of him, undertakes risks and faces dangers alongside of the most courageous. It is the same feeling which nerves medical men to enter infected houses, public officials to retain posts and to carry through great undertakings, though they are thereby exposed to ungenerous and ignorant criticism, the opposition of virulent and unscrupulous men, and years of hardship and toil. It is the root motive of much of the best work that men do.

But Nehemiah had the defects of his qualities. He did not escape the self-consciousness which accompanies an habitual consideration of what is due to one's position. He wrote his own history, and betrays some of the over-minute self-consideration of the autobiographer. It is open to every one to observe that men who can never forget their official station, although they are often useful public men, are yet apt to be pompous, dry, and artificial. The man who gives a handsome subscription because it is expected of him does a correct and useful thing, but that is all. The official who is constantly remembering the position he holds,—who, as it were, never appears in plain clothes,

who never, with Sir Thomas More, lays aside his robes of office, saying, "Lie there, Lord Chancellor,"—is not the highest type of man.

But the danger to character which accompanies consideration of our position must not blind us to the duty of imitating the Nehemiahs who never do anything unbecoming their rank in life, their education, their Christian standing, their position as parents or children or relatives in any degree. It is a man's first business to ascertain the relations he holds to others, and what these relations require. It is his first business to take a candid and close survey of his position in life, and set clearly before him the duties of his position. Many persons neglect their duty as citizens, they take no interest in public matters, but let them go as others see fit to guide them. How different would the life in many families be, if the parents occasionally put to themselves the simple and very obvious question, Am I doing everything which my position as a parent requires? Could the strictest investigation detect no omission? How much of the injury and injustice of life results from mere want of consideration, from the lack of all careful endeavour clearly to see what justice and mercy require of us towards the actual persons we are every day in contact with. Am I employed by others? Then have I entered into my employers' views of my duties? Do I employ others? Then this relationship carries with it certain duties and responsibilities. From every relationship we hold, from every capacity in which we deal with men, from our whole circumstances and position in life, there arise duties which we should face with the same manly and honest dignity as Nehemiah.

Another striking feature in Nehemiah's character, is the combination of self-reliance and trust in God. Untiring energy and prayerful habits were never more happily fused than in him. He prays as if God were to do everything:

he works as if all depended on himself. His self-reliance appeared as soon as he reached Jerusalem. He did not call a meeting and hear reports from this man and that; he did not summon the leading men and ask them what they thought he should do. He waited till night fell and every one was under his own roof, and then he saddled his ass and rode round the city walls, making his own observations; and having formed his plan he then summoned the people and told them what was to be done. Here was a man entirely self-reliant. But his dependence on God is equally conspicuous. Unless God is with him, he has no heart for the task laid upon him. "The God of heaven, He will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build." When the Samaritans gathered to attack the people whom they had long been used to despise as "these feeble Jews," the same harmony between work and prayer is discernible in Nehemiah's words, "We made our prayer unto God, and set a watch against them day and night." Here is a man with whom there is no weak waiting upon Providence, and yet who is possessed by a spirit of entire dependence on God.

Nehemiah, in short, seemed to escape the Scylla and Charybdis of prayer, neither allowing it to slack his energy nor leaving it wholly out of his life. The sentiment so often met with in modern thought, that the best prayer is hard work, and that no words are needed, is not so irreligious as it seems. It is at any rate true, that the man who is conscious he is striving only to do what God desires should be done may at times feel that God understands him and is with him, and that there is no call for laboured explanations. And of the two extremes it is certainly wiser to labour without articulate prayer than to pray without labour. If our prayers slacken our energies instead of bracing them, if they produce the feeling that things will turn out well whether we take all the pains or no, they are

hurtful. The truest prayer is the ever-renewed and untiring energy of the man who consecrates his whole life to God, who has found the secret of doing all in God and for God, and who has learned to consider himself as merely the organ and instrument of the Divine life and energy. But without express and uttered prayer this condition of harmony with God will scarcely be maintained. Prayer is the natural utterance and needed stimulus of such a state.

The business-like vigour with which Nehemiah governed Jerusalem, the strength of character with which he bore up against the repining and treachery within the city, and the watchfulness, courage, spirit, and cleverness with which he defeated all the plots of his enemies outside, were qualities which fitted him for a command of greater importance than this governorship. But he had at all events the satisfaction of finishing one solid piece of work. He had not lived in vain, nor frittered away his days in a muddle of half-achieved projects. Through risks innumerable, at great pecuniary cost, with self-denial in many forms, he brought his task to an end, and at last saw Jerusalem ringed round with a wall of which the Samaritans would now be the last to say that if a fox leapt upon it, it would crumble under his foot. To celebrate the completion of this work Nehemiah organized a procession of as much magnificence as could be furnished forth by the means at his disposal. Singers and musicians were invited from the surrounding country, the great men and officials were marshalled in due order, and the people being divided into two great bodies, one company headed by Ezra and accompanied by bands of music marched round the walls in one direction, while Nehemiah with the other company went in the opposite direction. The shouts and cheers of the people were heard far over the country. And it was probably during this enthusiasm that the people swore to their national covenant, and pledged themselves to keep

the Sabbath, to abstain from mixed marriages, and to furnish the requisite maintenance to the Levites.

Satisfied with the work he had accomplished, Nehemiah returned to report himself at the Persian court; but on obtaining a renewal of his leave of absence and returning to Jerusalem, he was dismayed and chagrined to find all his work undone. The service of God was abandoned, as the Levites, unsupported by the people, were compelled to go and seek a livelihood in agriculture or trade. A fish-market was regularly held on Sabbath; and on that day, which they had sworn to keep sacred from labour, all kinds of food were bought and sold, the harvest was secured, the grapes were pressed. To a man like Nehemiah nothing could be more exasperating than thus to find his laborious reforms summarily obliterated. The heat of temper he showed may be pardoned, while the boldness and resolution he displayed in stemming the popular tide and insisting that the law should be kept, though the whole trade of Jerusalem was against him, may well be appreciated and admired by a generation like ours that dares not insist on any reform which involves pecuniary sacrifice or injury to the interests of property and trade.

The position in which Nehemiah was thus placed, as fighting for the law almost single-handed, had an effect upon his character not altogether good. An eager apologist might indeed find excuse for the self-consciousness he displays in his own record of these events. But every one who reads the last chapter of his book without prepossession feels somewhat shocked at the tone in which he records his reforms. He need not have so insisted on our recognising that he was the only bulwark against the evils of his time. He might have left us to draw that conclusion, without the obtrusive, "I testified against them," "I contended with them." The regular refrain, too, with which he closes each section jars upon us, "Remember

me, O my God, for good," manifestly reckoning that his service, his good deeds, gave him a claim on God. So indeed in a sense they did. "God is not unjust to forget your labour of love." But there is so much else than service in a man's life, that when he himself emphasises the good he has done, and shows no consciousness of any defect, omission, or unworthiness, our sense of proportion is shocked.

Self-righteousness is the snare of reformers in private as in public life. Inveighing against one vice, to which they themselves have no temptation, they learn to judge all men, themselves included, by that one vice; and on the score of their own exemption from it gradually and unconsciously assume the airs of perfected persons. Unless the general and thorough reformation of the reformer himself goes hand-in-hand with social reformation, and unless he keeps a strict watch on his own character, it is at the greatest risk he assumes the function of a censor of morals. Inconsistent and imperfect morality, hardness, self-righteousness are the certain doom of all who, in their zeal to reform the lives of others, forget that they themselves need reformation, and assume the attitude of superior beings, and not the meekness and loving humility of those who themselves also are tempted.

But instead of dealing out what may, after all, be a mistaken judgment on one who at all events threw himself vigorously into the needed work of his day, we may be more profitably employed in considering how our own work shows when laid alongside of his. The first thing, doubtless, which will occur to many of us is, that if we sat down to write our autobiography we could not have so complacent a retrospect as Nehemiah. We could not set down in black and white any great sacrifices, twelve years given to the service of others, any definite conquest of prevalent evil, any accomplished work of permanent benefit

to mankind. Few may seem to have within their reach opportunity of great service. And yet until we actually make the attempt it is impossible to say what is or is not within our reach. And what is life worth, if in the retrospect we see nothing generous and self-sacrificing, nothing richly profitable to any one, rising above the flat commonplace and daily routine of common toil? It is not our position in life that is at fault, nor altogether our position that gives us our opportunity. A man's life is determined from within, and his usefulness or uselessness is measured by his capacity for self-sacrifice.

MARCUS DODS.

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON.

VI.

"Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my heart in Christ. Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say. But withal prepare me a lodging: for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted unto you.

"Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, saluteth thee; and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."—PHILEM. 20-25 (Rev. Ver.).

WE have already had occasion to point out that Paul's pleading with Philemon, and the motives which he adduces, are expressions, on a lower level, of the greatest principles of Christian ethics. If the closing salutations be left out of sight for the moment, there are here three verses, each containing a thought which needs only to be cast into its most general form to show itself as a large Christian truth.

I. Verse 20 gives the final moving form of the Apostle's request. Onesimus disappears, and the final plea is based altogether on the fact that compliance will pleasure and help Paul. There is but the faintest gleam of a possible