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Prison Ministry

**Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter 57 – “Reformation”

Solemnly and publicly the people of Judah had pledged themselves to obey the law of God. But when the influence of Ezra and Nehemiah was for a time withdrawn, there were many who departed from the Lord. Nehemiah had returned to Persia. During his absence from Jerusalem, evils crept in that threatened to pervert the nation. Idolaters not only gained a foothold in the city, but contaminated by their presence the very precincts of the temple. Through intermarriage, a friendship had been brought about between Eliashib the high priest and Tobiah the Ammonite, Israel's bitter enemy. As a result of this unhallowed alliance, Eliashib had permitted Tobiah to occupy an apartment connected with the temple, which heretofore had been used as a storeroom for tithes and offerings of the people.

Because of the cruelty and treachery of the Ammonites and Moabites toward Israel, God had declared through Moses that they should be forever shut out from the congregation of His people. See Deuteronomy 23:3-6. In defiance of this word, the high priest had cast out the offerings stored in the chamber of God's house, to make a place for this representative of a proscribed race. Greater contempt for God could not have been shown than to confer such a favor on this enemy of God and His truth.

On returning from Persia, Nehemiah learned of the bold profanation and took prompt measures to expel the intruder. "It grieved me sore," he declares; "therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber. 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."

Not only had the temple been profaned, but the offerings had been misapplied. This had tended to discourage the liberalities of the people. They had lost their zeal and fervor, and were reluctant to pay their tithes. The treasuries of the Lord's house were poorly supplied; many of the singers and others employed in the temple service, not receiving sufficient support, had left the work of God to labor elsewhere.

Nehemiah set to work to correct these abuses. He gathered together those who had left the service of the Lord's house, "and set them in their place." This inspired the people with confidence, and all Judah brought "the tithe of the corn and the new wine and the oil." Men who "were counted faithful" were made "treasurers over the treasuries," "and their office was to distribute unto their brethren."

Another result of intercourse with idolaters was a disregard of the Sabbath, the sign distinguishing the Israelites from all other nations as worshipers of the true God. Nehemiah found that heathen merchants and traders from the surrounding country, coming to Jerusalem, had induced many among the Israelites to engage in traffic on the Sabbath. There were some who could not be persuaded to sacrifice principle, but others transgressed and joined with the heathen in their efforts to overcome the scruples of the more conscientious. Many dared openly to violate the Sabbath. "In those days," Nehemiah writes, "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. . . . There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the Sabbath unto the children of Judah."

This state of things might have been prevented had the rulers exercised their authority; but a desire to advance their own interests had led them to favor the ungodly. Nehemiah fearlessly rebuked them for their neglect of duty. "What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the Sabbath day?" he sternly demanded. "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." He then gave command that "when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath," they should be shut, and not opened again till the Sabbath was past; and having more confidence in his own servants than in those that the magistrates of Jerusalem might appoint, he stationed them at the gates to see that his orders were enforced.

Not inclined to abandon their purpose, "the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice," hoping to find opportunity for traffic, with either the citizens or the country people. Nehemiah warned them that they would be punished if they continued this practice. "Why lodge ye about the wall?" he demanded;

"if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you." "From that time forth came they no more on the Sabbath." He also directed the Levites to guard the gates, knowing that they would command greater respect than the common people, while from their close connection with the service of God it was reasonable to expect that they would be more zealous in enforcing obedience to His law.

And now Nehemiah turned his attention to the danger that again threatened Israel from intermarriage and association with idolaters. "In those days," he writes, "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."

These unlawful alliances were causing great confusion in Israel; for some who entered into them were men in high position, rulers to whom the people had a right to look for counsel and a safe example. Foreseeing the ruin before the nation if this evil were allowed to continue, Nehemiah reasoned earnestly with the wrongdoers. Pointing to the case of Solomon, he reminded them that among all the nations there had risen no king like this man, to whom God had given great wisdom; yet idolatrous women had turned his heart from God, and his example had corrupted Israel. "Shall we then hearken unto you," Nehemiah sternly demanded, "to do all this great evil?" "Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves."

As he set before them God's commands and threatenings, and the fearful judgments visited on Israel in the past for this very sin, their consciences were aroused, and a work of reformation was begun that turned away God's threatened anger and brought His approval and blessings.

There were some in sacred office who pleaded for their heathen wives, declaring that they could not bring themselves to separate from them. But no distinction was made; no respect was shown for rank or position. Whoever among the priests or rulers refused to sever his connection with idolaters was immediately separated from the service of the Lord. A grandson of the high priest, having married a daughter of the notorious Sanballat, was not only removed from office, but promptly banished from Israel. "Remember them, O my God," Nehemiah prayed, "because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites."

How much anguish of soul this needed severity cost the faithful worker for God the judgment alone will reveal. There was a constant struggle with opposing elements, and only by fasting, humiliation, and prayer was advancement made.

Many who had married idolaters chose to go with them into exile, and these, with those who had been expelled from the congregation, joined the Samaritans. Hither some who had occupied high positions in the work of God found their way and after a time cast in their lot fully with them. Desiring to strengthen this alliance, the Samaritans promised to adopt more fully the Jewish faith and customs, and the apostates, determined to outdo their former brethren, erected a temple on Mount Gerizim in opposition to the house of God at Jerusalem. Their religion continued to be a mixture of Judaism and heathenism, and their claim to be the people of God was the source of schism, emulation, and enmity between the two nations, from generation to generation.

In the work of reform to be carried forward today, there is need of men who, like Ezra and Nehemiah, will not palliate or excuse sin, nor shrink from vindicating the honor of God. Those upon whom rests the burden of this work will not hold their peace when wrong is done, neither will they cover evil with a cloak of false charity. They will remember that God is no respecter of persons, and that severity to a few may prove mercy to many. They will remember also that in the one who rebukes evil the spirit of Christ should ever be revealed.

In their work, Ezra and Nehemiah humbled themselves before God, confessing their sins and the sins of their people, and entreating pardon as if they themselves were the offenders. Patiently they toiled and prayed and suffered. That which made their work most difficult was not the open hostility of the heathen, but the secret opposition of pretended friends, who, by lending their influence to the service of evil, increased tenfold the burden of God's servants. These traitors furnished the Lord's enemies with material to use in their warfare upon His people. Their evil passions and rebellious wills were ever at war with the plain requirements of God.

The success attending Nehemiah's efforts shows what prayer, faith, and wise, energetic action will accomplish. Nehemiah was not a priest; he was not a prophet; he made no pretension to high title. He was a reformer raised up for an important time. It was his aim to set his people right with God. Inspired with a great purpose, he bent every energy of his being to its accomplishment. High, unbending integrity marked his efforts. As he came into contact with evil and opposition to right he took so determined a stand that the people were roused to labor with fresh zeal and courage. They could not but recognize his loyalty, his patriotism, and his deep love for God; and, seeing this, they were willing to follow where he led.

Industry in a God-appointed duty is an important part of true religion. Men should seize circumstances as God's instruments with which to work His will. Prompt and decisive action at the right time will gain glorious triumphs, while delay and neglect result in failure and dishonor to God. If the leaders in the cause of truth show no zeal, if they are indifferent and purposeless, the church will be careless, indolent, and pleasure-loving; but if they are filled with a holy purpose to serve God and Him alone, the people will be united, hopeful, eager.

The word of God abounds in sharp and striking contrasts. Sin and holiness are placed side by side, that, beholding, we may shun the one and accept the other. The pages that describe the hatred, falsehood, and treachery of Sanballat and Tobiah, describe also the nobility, devotion, and self-sacrifice of Ezra and Nehemiah. We are left free to copy either, as we choose. The fearful results of transgressing God's commands are placed over against the blessings resulting from obedience. We ourselves must decide whether we will suffer the one or enjoy the other.

The work of restoration and reform carried on by the returned exiles, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, presents a picture of a work of spiritual restoration that is to be wrought in the closing days of this earth's history. The remnant of Israel were a feeble people, exposed to the ravages of their enemies; but through them God purposed to preserve in the earth a knowledge of Himself and of His law. They were the guardians of the true worship, the keepers of the holy oracles. Varied were the experiences that came to them as they rebuilt the temple and the wall of Jerusalem; strong was the opposition that they had to meet. Heavy were the burdens borne by the leaders in this work; but these men moved forward in unwavering confidence, in humility of spirit, and in firm reliance upon God, believing that He would cause His truth to triumph. Like King Hezekiah, Nehemiah "clave to the Lord, and departed not from following Him, but kept His commandments. . . . And the Lord was with him." 2 Kings 18:6, 7.

The spiritual restoration of which the work carried forward in Nehemiah's day was a symbol, is outlined in the words of Isaiah: "They shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities." "They that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in." Isaiah 61:4; 58:12.

The prophet here describes a people who, in a time of general departure from truth and righteousness, are seeking to restore the principles that are the foundation of the kingdom of God. They are repairers of a breach that has been made in God's law--the wall that He has placed around His chosen ones for their protection, and obedience to whose precepts of justice, truth, and purity is to be their perpetual safeguard.

In words of unmistakable meaning the prophet points out the specific work of this remnant people who build the wall. "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on My holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; and shalt honor Him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." Isaiah 58:13, 14.

In the time of the end every divine institution is to be restored. The breach made in the law at the time the Sabbath was changed by man, is to be repaired. God's remnant people, standing before the world as reformers, are to show that the law of God is the foundation of all enduring reform and that the Sabbath of the fourth commandment is to stand as a memorial of creation, a constant reminder of the power of God. In clear, distinct lines they are to present the necessity of obedience to all the precepts of the Decalogue. Constrained by the love of Christ, they are to co-operate with Him in building up the waste places. They are to be repairers of the breach, restorers of paths to dwell in. See verse 12. \

Light at Eventide

"The kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom." Daniel 7:27. {PK 680.1}

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