

Nehemiah

Government and Guidance

Twelve years after the mission team of Ezra and company set out to restore worship to its rightful place in Jerusalem and to teach men to love the law, news reached Shushan through Hanani that things were not progressing as well as they expected. He spoke about walls that were still in ruin and gates that had been burned. He spoke about “affliction” and “reproach.” His missionary report was not a glorious one. The picture he painted was one of struggle and desperation.

Solomon, in his book of Proverbs, had spoken about men without character (that necessary internal strength and discipline) as being cities, broken down and without walls (Prov. 25:28). Such was the state of David’s once great city. Open gates, and broken walls presented a gaping and toothless face to the enemies of God. A city without gates had no control over its own life. It was a display of its defenselessness and an open invitation to every evil. Every home must be able to shut as well as open its own doors. Every home must be able to close itself off from the chaos and the crowds. Every home must have the ability to welcome good and refuse the entry of evil if it is to survive. A gate is an outward manifestation of the will and the door of self control. A saint must be able to close the door of his prayer closet and at times be alone with God. A family must be able to define and defend itself if it is to remain a family. A Saint must know the limits and boundaries of piety and the perimeters of righteousness. Every godly man and woman knows there are lines that must not be crossed and doors that are best unopened. Some have named these walls ‘separation,’ ‘temperance,’ or ‘self-control.’ But everyone should know where they live and each child of God able to point to the well marked boundaries of their Father’s property.

Nehemiah, the king’s cupbearer, took the news from Jerusalem hard and it made his heart heavy. The holy history has given us a treasure by telling the tale of this mighty man of God. In it there is a curriculum of character that every Sabbath School should teach.

James said that *“faith without works is dead.”* Nehemiah was very much alive. God gave Esther her beauty and Mordecai his grace, and Ezra a beautiful hand with which to write down God’s words. He gave some men five talents and others two, but to Nehemiah he gave more than most. He was a preacher in his own right, as well as a minister, a teacher and an encourager. He was more a giver than a taker and gave with simplicity, and few men ever ruled as well as he. He was diligent and determined and yet full of mercy. His disposition was rarely clouded, so much so that everyone quickly noticed if the sunshine of his cheerfulness was not high in its heaven. It seems God greatly equipped this man “for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry.”

There are times that demand a leader. There are times when a shepherd (or under-shepherd) must bring order and reason and point the way. Although Israel had the pillar of cloud by day and the fire by night, let her not reject her Moses’, for God gives gifts unto men. And although God might have sent an angel to divide the Old Testament from the New we read “there was a man sent from God, whose name was John.” Let every gifted man never “think of himself more highly than he ought” (Rom. 12:3), and let no congregation make golden idols of calves or personality cults of characters; yet at the same time let us recognize that God does call some men to positions of leadership. “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom 13:1).

If the first Scribe is found in Ezra, some say Nehemiah was the first Pharisee. That does not do



justice to Nehemiah or to history. The Pharisee did not start as he ended. This sect was born from the ashes of humiliation and with Maccabean revolt and revival one hundred years before our Savior's birth. Their error was in mistaking conformity with conversion and restrictions with convictions. Their mistake was in that they attempted to set up walls of separation with unworthy stones quarried from the traditions of men. They set up complicated rules and regulations as gates intended to keep men safe within the kingdom, when in fact they resulted in keeping men out (Matt. 23:13).

Some see some Pharisee in the prayers of Nehemiah and his often use of the first personal pronoun, but let us not confuse honesty with hypocrisy. What man alive does not look at life from the citadel of 'self.' Every great leader knows who they are, even if they are but a "voice crying in the wilderness." Every leader knows himself and has tested the limits of his endurance, and is familiar with the scope of his abilities. Nehemiah was a great leader and his was a great life.

Every great leader is convinced, not of his own importance, but of the importance of his work. For such a leader every work is sacred and holy, every work is a form of worship, and idleness and indolence is hell itself. Every great teacher, doctor, nurse, every great builder or banker is convinced of the same thing and can say with Nehemiah "*I am doing a great work*" (Neh. 6:3). This is not braggadocio. Achievers are sometimes accused of pride when less ambitious men misinterpret such declarations. Nehemiah would be the first to point out that the greatness is in the mission and not the man. As a pearl is not appreciated by the swine (Matt. 7:6) but recognized and appropriated by the skilled merchant (Matt. 13:45), so some men never see the opportunity or value in a certain work. Some never are stirred or moved to build broken walls or set up fallen gates, and yet they are the first to accuse Nehemiah of pride. So it was with David when he dared to answer Goliath's challenge while his brothers and the armies of Saul trembled. "*And Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spake unto the men and Eliab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, Why camest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle*" (1Sam. 17:28). Poor David and any other man who responds to the call of duty. For everyone that begins to actually "do" there are a thousand critics who will accuse him of sins that are in their own hearts, although he himself never thinks of grandeur or self glory. A real leader expects but ignores such faultfinders.

Every preacher who has ever found a parish with its walls in ruin and gates blackened or in ashes should read Nehemiah over and over again. They should learn when to keep silent and when to speak. They should go in the night, unseen by any but God and should study the wall long before attempting any work. They should pray and ponder and pray again. They should visit the valley gate and seek to get to the bottom of the situation. They should find the dragon well and the dung port. They should find the fountain gate and taste the waters sweet or bitter.

Let every servant with a pastor's heart notice the broken places of the city of God. Let him notice that walls are made up of many stones and every stone has its place. Let every shepherd see the need to set the gates upon their hinges that they may be closed in the night to protect the little ones from thieves. Let every leader learn from Nehemiah. Let every preacher choose his words wisely and so move God's people to "rise up and build" (2:18). Let not the mockery of Sanballat nor the temptations of Tobiah cause the work to cease. May every worker be encouraged to have a heart to work and every saint be equipped with the necessary instruments of duty and defense (4:17). And if men should become weary in well doing, let every pastor find the right text for the task at hand, and let him deliver it with passion. "*And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them; remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses*" (4:14).

The book of Nehemiah is about government and guidance. Every community needs both. Nehemiah was appointed to an important post as Governor of God's city. No government in the world, as we know it, will be perfect. No church government is without its weaknesses or town without its trouble. But if a city is to be whole it must build up the broken and unconnected places until the circle is complete. If a religious society begins to build what it calls holy walls may those walls have many places where men may enter in. Let not the walls keep out those who need to know its safety.



May they be no higher than heaven has ordained. May the gates swing open to welcome whosoever may come without charge, and yet may they bar only those who love not the law of the land.

May every true work of faith have openings through which it may touch the world for good. May piety be balanced with practicality. May there be a Fish Gate through which might go the fishers of men. May there be a Valley Gate through which the lowly may enter. Let every holy city have near the valley of Gehenna a Dung Gate through which unclean or unnecessary things (Phil. 3:8) may pass away. Let the Fountain Gate be ever open and the waters pure and free. May those who drink of its waters spring up with joy and gladness. May there be also a Water Gate and set by it a tower that should ever guard its purity and its truth.

Keep the Horse Gate ready for the defense of the city and pray when thy sons ride out into battle. By the time you come to the Sheep Gate you have made a full circle around the wall of the holy city. Through that gate come sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving without which no work or city would be complete.

There is one lone gate that is closed. Keep thy eye upon the east gate for through it shall come the King of Kings. Be prepared for his soon return. "Lift up your head oh ye gates even lift them up ye everlasting doors and the king of glory will come in. Who is this king of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle" (Ps 24). Who is the king of glory? Jesus is the king of glory.

Let every child of God find and take his place along the wall. Be he like Uzziel the goldsmith, or Hananiah the apothecary, may he build up the sacred things. May each understand that he is poor who is not rich toward God (Lk. 12:21) though one deal in treasures, and may the druggest know that there are some hurts that only God can heal. Let every child of God join in to raise the city of our God.



Laws of Leadership

Life is a stewardship. Everyone is given a sacred trust and a task to perform. Some are given a home to keep, others a garden to tend, and, as in the case of Nehemiah, a holy city to build. Nehemiah went from keeping a cup to keeping a kingdom. Many would have chosen to hang on to that cup in Shushan. Many would have settled for civil service in Persia when God was grooming them for paradise. It was no little thing to stand at the right hand of the world's most powerful monarch. While Artaxerxes discussed diplomacy with his most trusted advisors and spoke of the most important affairs of state, the cup bearer was always near. The office of cup bearer had historic and heroic significance. There was a time when fear and suspicion made kings very careful about who poured their wine and with that there evolved a place for a trusted servant who became extra eyes and ears and taste buds for the king. Whatever the cup bearer was by the time Nehemiah stood at the Son of Xerxes right hand, he was most of all a "friend."

What a privilege it was to be the friend of such a powerful person. But more importantly, Nehemiah was a friend of God. He was never satisfied with his own ease or comfort; he cared first for God. The verse is ever true, "he that is faithful in little shall be faithful in much." Nehemiah was Governor.

Each of us is set in charge over something. Let us be faithful in little things leaving promotions to providence. Let us be faithful with Jethro's sheep before we ever dream of keeping Israel's. Let us hold the wooden staff we find in our hand and leave it to God whether or not it should become a scepter. Let us be faithful standing our post, being ever vigilant until God relieves us.

Let every steward, be he captain or corporal, learn from Nehemiah the laws of leadership. There are seven.

1. Law of Imagination. (2:5) *"That I might build"* Every true leader first works in his mind. Long before the first brick is laid or the first timber is cut the mind of the leader is studying the invisible blueprint of the imagination. Every leader dreams before he arises. Every visible building, cathedral, arena or aqueduct was first built in someone's mind. Every song, sonnet, dress or bonnet was first imagined and then sketched, first played then written, first dreamed and then seamed. We build, mind first. Leaders have the ability to see what "can be" while others merely see what is. The Wright brothers first dreamed dreams before they pulled their peculiar flying invention onto the sands of Kitty Hawk. Frank Loyd Wright saw buildings and cities that seemed to come from another world. They did come from another world. They came from the world of his imagination.

Cristopher Fry spoke of imagination as the sixth sense. He who cannot employ this other sense is indeed handicapped. Imagination is the act or power of forming mental images of what is not yet present. It is the closest thing to faith this side of the spirit.

Nehemiah rose up in the night and studied the situation (2:12). A leader is not ignorant of reality. Nehemiah was very aware of the problems and the circumstances of the day. He wanted to know where the walls were broken. He wanted to see the doorless gates with his own eyes. He wanted to look reality in the face. It takes courage to go over your bankrupt books. It takes courage to sound the depths, count the coins, and inspect the troops when we are among the shallows, paying overdue accounts, or mustering ranks of a deserting army: but that is leadership.

Imagination does not dream of phantom armies in the face of fleeing troops, but envisages what could be done with the few that remain. Imagination does not despair at the sight of broken walls or dry wells, it instead sees things as they might become.

Every home, country, government, or congregation needs men like Joseph who can "dream dreams."



Every nation and society needs men like Nehemiah who see needs among the broken walls of Zion, but also see the possibilities.

Paul wrote to the saints in Rome *“be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* Even men are changed first in the mind. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as an eagle. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.

Nehemiah’s spirit wanted to “mount up with wings.” He saw a need and dreamed of addressing that need. *“And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my father’s sepulchres, that I may build it”* (2:5).

2. Law of Identity (2:7). *“convey me”* Every great leader has a good understanding of who they are. A true leader is one who takes the challenge and the charge personally. Isaiah said, *“Here am I Lord, send me”* (Isa. 6). A leader is not content to wait forever for someone to respond to a need. He feels compelled to do something.

Nehemiah asked for letters of authority. Leaders are usually qualified or they have a skill of recruiting qualified persons to join their cause. A man of authority is under authority and understands authority. The centurion seeking Christ’s help for his servant said, *“For I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it”* Lk. 7:8 Jesus called his faith a “great” faith. He recognized the authority of Jesus.

The law of identity is not made of arrogance, neither is it necessarily fueled by pride. It is a realization that life is a personal responsibility. Socrates said “Know thyself.” That “self” is made of wonderful material. The Psalmist said *“I am fearfully and wonderfully made”* (Ps. 139:14). This is not merely speaking about the physical construction of man, although that is marvelous and fantastic in itself. It is also speaking about those invisible parts of man as well. It is also important to remember that God sees right through the outer to see the inner. It is man that *“looketh on the outward appearance, God looketh on the heart”* (1Sam. 16:7). God looks beyond the surface and sees the “I” of self. God seeks not to crush it, but to help it find its way.

Those with “low self-esteem” may often be the proudest of all. In fact timidity is often pride turned inside out. Some “low-self-esteem” is a form of obsession with self. Humility is simply honesty. It is not humility for an accomplished pianist to fain inadequacy, or for a skilled surgeon to “shuffle his feet and say ‘ah shucks’” after surgery. It is not spiritual to deny skill, training, or responsibility in life. There is a hypocritical pretension that sometimes passes “godliness” that is no “godliness” at all.

A leader knows how far he can jump and how fast he can run and always tries to do his best and to do better. A leader remembers that it is *“God that giveth power to get wealth”* and does not boast of gifts that are God given. But no one knows more than a leader, that those gifts are given as seed corn which much be planted, watered, cultivated and cared for, and that no harvest comes easy. Paul said *“I am what I am by the grace of God”* (1Cor.15:10). God gives muscle to every man. Muscles that are not used will atrophy, as will the mind, and as do opportunities

John the baptist called himself a voice, others called him a prophet. He knew who he was. He had no identity crisis, but said *“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord”* (Jn 1:23).

A person who knows who he is is less likely to be sidelined by ridicule or opposition than one filled with doubt and uncertainty. When Sanballat came with his sarcasm, Nehemiah was ready.

“But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do: will ye rebel against the king? Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will pros



per us; therefore we his servants will arise and build; but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem” (2:19-20).

Don't send your children out without them knowing who they are. The Sanballats frequent every school yard and shall use ridicule in their attempts to keep anyone from breaking away from the herd of mediocrity. Help your children to discover hidden gifts, skills, and talents. Help them to recognize inherited or natural weaknesses. Help them to humbly accept both and willingly assume their place in God's wonderful plan.

3. Law of Integrity (5:9-12) Real greatness as well as real leadership can not be had without integrity. Integrity must be the bedrock of character. Paul warned Timothy about the importance of this principle. *“And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully” (2Tim. 2:5).* All crowns achieved without honesty and integrity (lawfully) will turn to tarnish with a single glance of God on judgment day.

Abraham asked a hypothetical question when he asked *“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25b).* The answer is obvious. God must do right, for he is God. God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2). The laws of leadership demand the highest standards. Any success without it is only temporary and a delusion.

Students that have “cheated” their way to honor have not sufficient character to endure the fires of adversity and certainly not the fires of judgment. *“Be sure your sins will find you out” (Num. 32:23).* Solomon wrote, *“A false balance is abomination to the LORD: but a just weight is his delight... The integrity of the upright shall guide them: but the perverseness of transgressors shall destroy them” (Prov. 11:1,3).*

4. Law of Industry (4:21) *“So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared.”* Tomatoes do not grow by accident. Rag weed may infest the ground as well as thistles, but they make for a poor salad. Things of value require hard work. Watches do not grow on trees nor do they fall like manna, they are made. Man was made to work. The toil came only after Adam sinned.

In work man comes close to high calling. Industry is life. *“Faith”* said James *“without works is dead” (Ja. 2:17).* Faith believes in the wind. Industry raises the sail. Yes, faith without works is dead. Nehemiah understood the joys and importance of labor. When tempted to come down from the wall to talk with the enemies upon the fields of Ono he said *“Why should I come down? I am doing a great work” (6:3).* Let every man find what he can call a great work and set out to do it.

This spirit is contagious. Soon after his arrival in Jerusalem, he was able to conquer indolence and *“the people had a mind to work” (4:6).* Children who learn to love work will enjoy the fruits of their labor. Children should be taught the words of wisdom *“In all labor there is profit: but the talk of the lips tendeth only to [poverty]” (Prov. 14:23).* They should study nature and listen to God. *“Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise” (Prov. 6:6).* They should observe successful men and not begrudge their success. *“Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men” (Prov. 22:29).* And should one pretend idleness is meditation or worship, let him read the second half of the third commandment again *“Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work” (Ex. 20:9).* Many minister who hopes to lead men to green pastures on the Lord's Day must work hard on the six days that proceed it. The ministry is no place for the slacker. *“If a son ask his father for bread will he give him a stone?”*

5. Law of Inspiration (2:17) No man is a leader who fails to inspire. *“let us rise up and build” (2:17).* These are the words that can lift up the fallen. The inspiration of this law is not the one that comes from heaven, but rather the one that takes men there. The orthodox doctrine of inspiration says that the Bible is “God-breathed.” No man can recreate that. The inspiration that leadership demands, can breath life into the nearly dead.



Nehemiah's speech as truly inspiring. It stirred the hearts of those who heard him. As did the words



of Peter, James, and John. Inspiration is water to the thirsty, and extended hand to those who have stumbled, and wind that stirs the smoldering ashes into flame.

Sometimes inspiration comes with words like those of Tom Paine to Washington's discouraged troops in the bone numbing cold of Valley Forge. Sometimes inspiration is in an example of a single soul who will not bow. Sometimes inspiration is in a smile or cheerful disposition in the face of adversity. Inspiration comes in many forms. Nehemiah and every other leader has the ability to inspire others.

Losers whine, and complain. Leaders encourage, praise, and sing. Losers gripe and grapple with difficult things. Leaders grab them and put them in perspective. Losers wring their hands. Leaders lend their hand. Leaders inspire us to greatness.

6. Law of Instruction. All Chapter three of Nehemiah is an instruction book about rebuilding a holy city. Leaders are able to communicate their vision to others. It was not God's will that one man build a city. It is not God's will that one man build a church. A leader is one who is able to put his vision in simple words that people can understand.

The Lord left his disciples with instructions to teach his words to others. *"Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you"* (Matt. 28:19-20). The mission of the church is that of communicating a vision. That is instruction.

In another place Paul instructed Timothy *"Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also"* (2Tim. 2:2).

An idea does a governor little good if he is not able to communicate it to others. A leader must be able to explain the situation and explain solutions to problems. If the first rule of instruction is to communicate the second is like unto it: to delegate. No one can do everything. Nehemiah gave every hand something to do. Every family, and every individual knew what they or he was supposed to do. Paul described the church as a body with many members. Not every member is the eye nor is every member the foot. The body needs all its parts. A leader is knows a hand when he sees it and gives it something to do. That, simply, is leadership.

7. Law of Invocation (6:3,12,16). Most of all, a Christian leader must be able to pray. Jerusalem was not built because of Nehemiah's hand. Neither was it built because of the many hands of the Israelites who *"had a mind to work."* Jerusalem was build because of an unseen hand that guided, guarded, and pointed the way. No man can know true leadership until he knows God. No man can build any lasting work unless God helps him. Nehemiah pointed out the work *"was wrought of our God."* The ability to pray has nothing to do with flowery public prayers, but rather powerful private praying. If imagination is the sixth sense, the ability to live in God's presence is the seventh. How was Nehemiah to know what would please God, had he not discovered it from God himself. Christian leaders must learn in prayer what cannot possibly be discovered in the temporal dimension.

James has been accused by some of over emphasizing works over faith. Not so. Behind and beneath every work is an unseen strength. It is in the letter of James that we read *"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him...but let him ask in faith..."* (Ja. 1:5,6a). Leadership requires a person see a little farther ahead than others. It requires a unique discernment to recognize dangers, count strengths, and capitalize on weaknesses. No man can see far enough who does not pray. The apostolic leadership of the first century church had its priorities right when it promised *"we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."* The most important thing every leader can do is pray.



Order

There are walls and then there are walls. Walls define and defend. Walls surround and unite, but they also separate and exclude. Walls connect, but they also dissect. Walls help to bring order, security, peace and prosperity. The psalmist prayed for “*peace within thy walls*” (Ps. 122:7). Walls are often a reflection of those within them as they present their face to the world. “*I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down*” (Prov. 24:30-31). Walls are boundaries that help us get our bearings. Scripture speaks of a blind man “*groping*” for the wall as if to help him discover where he is (Isa. 59:10).

Then there are invisible walls. Some surround evil imaginations of pride and prejudice. We pray that these walls shall collapse like the walls of wicked Jericho. The church is sometimes called to march or pray its way around their foundations until they fall. There are the prison walls like those of fear that trap and oppress people. These too need to be breached and broken. There are sinful walls that cut us off from God and our brother. These too, should come down.

On the other hand, there are walls of right and reason. There are walls of truth. There are limits and boundaries. There are God’s “*thou shalt not’s.*” These are there for our own good. These are the walls of Biblical separation. After Nehemiah saw the physical walls go up around the holy city attention was turned to the spiritual walls that are necessary to keep the invisible enemies at bay. Ezra was called upon to read God’s word to the people.

“And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding...” (8:2). Let us never forget that “*faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*” Woe to the nation or family that forgets God’s law.

Next to the communion table and the prayer altar, the most important furnishing of an assembly is the sacred desk, the pulpit. “*And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose.*” (8:4). Where the word of God does not have a high, holy, and special place, soon there will be no communion table, nor will any be kneeling at the altar in prayer.

“Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people.” Many a successful man can remember their father carefully opening “the book.” Wherever the book is opened there is hope. No matter how dark the night of any age, there is light in the home where the book is opened. The book has been banned from many halls of government, circles, and societies. Where the book is not opened there is darkness.

The people arose when the book was opened as if one of great honor had just entered the room. There is hope where the word of God is opened, there is hope when people still hold it with honor and respect. Hopeless are the people who do not honor this book of books. Those who show it disrespect and hold it with disdain are doomed.

After prayer teachers began to take up the task of reading and expounding the Scriptures. They read in the book in the law of God distinctly (8:8). Let every preacher be clear that there be no confusion about what God said. Those who do not hold to the solid position of verbal, plenary, inspiration have blurred God’s speech. Those who play loose and free with eternal words do their hearers a great injustice. The apostle Paul was careful as not to handle the word of God deceitfully (2Cor. 4:2). Preachers need to be more clear than clever.

The first goal of good teaching is to cause congregations to understand the reading; but no one has truly understood God’s word if it gets no deeper than their head. It must also reach the heart. “*All*



the people wept, when they heard the words of the law” (8:9). The effect of God’s word is first to break, then to mend. McCheyne said “only a broken hearted sinner can receive a crucified Christ.” To skip over the teaching of the law is to make Calvary simply a sentimental symbol and the cross an ornamental token worn as mindless jewelry around an unbent neck. It is the law that breaks our heart and gives meaning to Christ’s sacrifice and suffering. Yet while the law kills, grace quickly comes to save. Any teaching of the law without grace is incomplete and oppressive. Ezra was quick to point to God’s mercy and call God’s people to joy reminding them not to be down cast “*for the joy of the LORD is your strength*” (8:10).

People who open “the book” regularly, read it to understanding, allowing it to do its great work within their hearts are not sour, somber, or cynical people. Those who walk with and worship God in spirit and in truth are “happy” people, and that joy is what carries them through difficult days.

“If ye know these things, happy are ye if you do them” said Jesus (Jn. 13:17). Happiness is contingent upon obedience. No sooner do we begin reading God’s book then we discover an inconsistency between some precept and our practice. It is we, not the Bible, that must change. We must obey if we are to continue in the joy of the LORD. As Ezra continued to lead the people into the truths of God’s word they realized that they had become slack in observing certain feasts that God had instituted. The believers rediscovered the Feast of the Tabernacles and restored it to the liturgical calendar. During this feast every family moved out of the comfort of their home and into a makeshift booth that reminded them of their wilderness wanderings. The feast was to be a reminder to be ever grateful for God’s deliverance from Egypt and his provision all those forty years in the desert.

The ninth chapter of Nehemiah is a recounting of Jewish history. Jewish history is a holy history. It is a story of God working and walking among his people. Jewish history is not about Abraham, and Jacob, and Moses. It is about Abraham and God, and Jacob and God, and Moses and God. It is the story of providence. When God’s people were faithful they knew peace, prosperity, and happiness. When they forgot God they knew sorrow. An honest study of providence brings every saint to the same conclusion as found in this historical telling: “*Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly*” (Neh. 9:33).

After the history was reviewed and confession was made, the people compacted together to make a covenant (9:38). They made a re-commitment to God and his goals. They were willing to fix their names to a new testament. It was as if a married couple renewed their vows. It was as if, after a revival, men committed themselves to establish a new local assembly, desiring to be its charter members. Some congregations call upon all its constituents to sign the church covenant annually. And while a piece of paper does not in itself a marriage make, its absence betrays a fear more than a faith the unmarried couple have in each other. While many bemoaned the tyranny of England over colonial America, it took brave men to affix their signatures to the bottom of the Declaration of Independence and John Hancock by the largeness of his letters seemed the most committed of all.

The more we read God’s word, the more we see we are falling short of the glory. Soon the people came upon a principle of separation that they had ignored. “*On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammorite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever*” (13:1). Somehow Tobiah, the enemy, had actually moved into the very courts of the temple. “*And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, was allied unto Tobiah; And he had prepared for him a great chamber.*” (13:4-5a). We cannot keep the birds from flying over our heads, but we can keep them from building a nest on our brains. That Tobiah had moved into the house of God should not surprise us. When Christ visited the temple four hundred years later he found it had become a house of merchandise. He had to drive the cattle and money changers out.

With the temple now gone, it is our heart that must be kept sacred and separated today. We must not allow any ungodly inhabitants, ideas or interests to lodge within its courts. We must pray with David “*Search me oh God and know my heart...and see if there be any wicked thing in me.*”

Nehemiah discovering, upon his return back to Jerusalem after a visit with Artaxerxes, Tobiah’s



living arrangements became livid. He threw all Tobiah's furniture out and reclaimed the chamber for holy purposes. After this cleansing, the Governor addressed the failure of the people to provide for the Levites. This neglect brought great hardship for God's holy tribe and the temple services. Funds were raised and order was restored once again. After that, Nehemiah turned his attention to the Sabbath which was being violated. This breach of the fourth commandment threatened to break covenant with God and had to be mended. Nehemiah "contended" with those who defiled God's day and re-established this token of faith. It was decreed that with the fall of night and beginning of each Sabbath the gates should be closed as saints attended to things more important than commerce. "I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the Sabbath" (13:19).

Impiety is not so easily persuaded. The merchants who were forbidden entry on the Sabbath lingered just outside the gates violating the spirit of the decree. The temptation was deliberate and any so inclined need only slip beyond the wall and walk a few steps should they desire to make a purchase. Satan's merchants are never far from anyone who ever wanted to sell himself.

It is not enough that children be told that drugs are wrong and illegal, we must chase the drug dealers far away from our little ones. It is not enough to make vows and promises to God, we must make no provision for the lusts of the flesh. The merchants of worldly dainties and damning doctrines must not be allowed to linger at our gates. The governors of the assembly must drive them away (13:21) as shepherds must drive away the wolves lest they devour the little lambs.

Conclusion

From the day the diaspora began, first when Samaria fell and then Jerusalem, God was preparing his people to return and build again the broken things. This new temple would never compare to the splendor of Solomon's temple. But then again, the splendor was Solomon's idea, not God's. A temple needs little gold if it has the glory. The seventy years of captivity are not unlike the days and years of discipline that wayward disciples know. Often they are the consequences of conscious decisions made in sin and borne in sorrow. Every generation must learn for itself that it must trust God enough to obey him and follow his word. Ruined lives are the broken walls of Zion. Godless temples are the result of neglected worship. Burned gates are always the result of the lack of discipline and failure to "deny self and follow" God. Yet there is hope for every broken city and every broken life. There is hope and help in God.

Ezra and Nehemiah spoke of the "hand" of God being upon them. This is the hand of providence; and the hand of providence is not heavy. To believe in providence is to believe that God is working. He is working all things together for (His good design) to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28) The hand of providence is also the hand that gave us the Bible that tells of God working in us "*both to will and to do his good pleasure*" (Phil. 2:13). In other places we are told that "in him we live, and move and have our being..." and that he "*hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation*". (Acts 17:28,26). And in another place "*For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers, all things were created by him and for him; and he is before all things and by him all things consist*" (Col. 1:16-17).

Creationism focuses on the miracle and the marvel of physical creation. But there is more. Providence is the only logical explanation of the continuance of life generated by God. Before God spoke the first syllable of the word "light" he understood the Alpha and the Omega of it. God had a plan. Before the first atom was created he first "thought it" and had a plan and purpose for it. Before he made man out of the red clay of Eden he had a reason for doing so. Providence is the "will and the



to do of God.” Providence is grace at work.

It was not the purpose of God that man should meander aimlessly through what he calls his life any more than it was the plan of God for man to wander in the wilderness for forty years— and yet, somehow, providence insures not only that Israel eventually gets to the promised land, but that each wayward step is somehow worked into God’s goal for good. It is not the will of God that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. We can sometimes learn more in our failures than we can in our triumphs. This is not to suggest that we “sin that grace may abound.” God forbid! Instead, it means that through grace there is a way back from every captivity and beauty that can come even from ashes. Sometimes we are taken to Shushan in chains because of our own sins and sometimes because of what others have done. But where we are and how we got there are is not as important as where we are going.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther is the story of providence. Theologians dissect this phenomenon into three aspects: preservation, concurrence, and guidance. Chapter nine of Nehemiah retells the long checkered history of Judaism. It is grace working among ungracious people. It is the story of goodness working among the ruins of ingratitude. It is about God keeping his word, even when man has trouble doing the same. The priestly prayer and the historical account that follows is a study of preservation, concurrence, and guidance.

“Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all...” (Neh. 9:6).

God Moves
providence moves like a glacier
upon a steady course
none can stand before it
or hold back its mighty force

But while its pace is patient
its white weight moveth on
for the plans of God are ancient
set before creations dawn

It clears all things before it
as it inches to the sea
it never crushes Adam’s will
or responsibility.

But if the will of God is like a glacier, does it not crush everything in its path? Are we not doomed to be merely the victims of events that are so designed before the world was made? No. No one need be crushed by providence, for creation also empowers man with the ability to ride the tide rather than to foolishly try to hold it back.

God’s kingdom is coming. Everyone is invited to enter in through the gate (faith in Jesus) or choose to remain outside in the kingdom of darkness and doom. The Jewish kingdom was just a shadow. God was the light. The story recounted in Nehemiah is one of continual failure to understand and appreciate the nature and nurture of the kingdom. The ministry of Jesus was to open the gates of the kingdom to all who tired of all the fallen and failed kingdoms of this earth. *“Whoever comes to me, I will in no wise cast out”* (Jn. 6:37). While no one need be crushed by the coming kingdom, everyone must be “broken” before they may enter in. It is only after we have realized that we have “broken” God’s laws, commandments, precepts, and wishes that we can understand why we as sinners live among the ruins of paradise. It is only when we admit that our stubbornness and rebellious



ness results in the collapse of our homes, dreams, and lives, and that our unwillingness to appreciate God eventually finds us a captive in Shuhan that there can be a restoration. It is only when we long to be rid of pagan, heathen, and self made kings that we come out of Persia like the Magi in search of the King of Kings. It is only when we long to be free to worship God that God allows a cupbearer to return and start to make things right again.

“Jesus saith unto them, did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner; this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? therefore say I unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whosoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder” (Matt. 21:42-44).

No broken city is without hope. No broken marriage or relationship need remain in rubble. Even when it is impossible to set things up exactly as they were before, God can guide in the building up of a more glorious city. The temple might not be as large or impressive as the original, but it can be as glorious if God is permitted to be God within and without and fallen altars are up-righted and lit again.

But the “stone” which other builders rejected must become, for us, the head of the corner. His word and will must be our walls and our gates. His Spirit the fountain springing up within the city. The temple mount must be kept pure and holy and the flame of gratitude ever burning upon its altars. Let no one try to rebuild broken things without the hand and help of God. And let no one be satisfied to live a life without him.

And should the wise and loving hand of providence ordain that we should be deposed as Vashti or lifted up like Esther let us bow graciously before a God who is too good to be unkind and too wise to make a mistake. If we are delivered from the gallows like Mordecai or beheaded like John the Baptist, let us trust our neck to the one who reigns eternal, trusting him to use our ministry or our martyrdom for his good and glory.

God Rules

God rules, and never chance.
trust not fate, but providence.
God is ever in control,
and ever watching o’r my soul.
The Lord is still in charge
of every little thing, or large.
He does not ask or send,
but He’ll empower and defend.
Nor does he order things
for which he will not pay.
If bid me fly, He’ll give me wings
and guide me all the way.

