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# THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

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## 4. Restoration (Ch. 13)

*Introduction.* A man with his eyes open will always see a great deal which needs to be remedied, if he really has the moral courage to face up to the challenge. It is not enough to have attended the Conference to hear the Word of God: not even sufficient to have applied the message in so personal a manner as to lead to repentance and a solemn avowal to remedy what is amiss. All this is good but insufficient. To be a doer of the Word involves action, and repentance is a misnomer if it does not produce results. 'Trust in the Lord *and do good*' is the Psalmist's good advice.

**Summary.** Ch. 13. Reason for separation. (ver 1-3)  
Removing the enemy. (ver 4-9)  
Reforming abuses. (ver 10-31)

*Reason for Separation.* How fruitful can be the public reading of the Word of God if men give heed to it! The reason for this separation was that in their searching the Scriptures they found a clear statement (Deut. 23:4-5) forbidding this mixed fellowship. So having read, they prepared to act upon the message. This separation meant presumably ceremonial exclusion from their worship and festivals (as Ch. 9:2 would imply), not forcibly ejecting these people from their territory. Did they, perhaps, in their enthusiasm go beyond the Law? The enactment in Deut. 23 excluded the Ammonite or the Moabite for ever, but made provision for the Edomite or Egyptian to have fellowship with them in the 3rd generation, but here they appear to deal with the whole mixed multitude. In the particular case cited in Deut. 23 the reason for the prohibition is given: the attempt both by physical and spiritual means to put every obstacle in the way of the Israelites when they came out of Egypt. That was, in fact, to act as the Adversary's agents to hinder all spiritual progress. Israel was always exposed to the danger of the mixed multitude e.g., Numbers 11:4. Further it should be borne in mind that though Balaam failed to curse the Israelites he did succeed in leading them into perilous temptations. (Numbers 31:16). The Word of God still insists on separation (2 Cor. 6:17) for the

world still has seductive snares. This is the permanent danger to which any form of Church organization is exposed which opens its ranks to any but converted men and women. But to insist on separation does not mean isolation. Though He was 'separate from sinners' the Lord mixed with them so much that His enemies derisively called Him their friend. The early Church had a very real sense of belonging to their 'own company' and no man dared lightly to join himself unto them (Acts 5:13) but they went out to do a great work of evangelising and great numbers were added to them. There is nothing exclusive or superior about separation: it is simply the realisation that we worship a holy Lord Who requires us to be holy also. 'What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?' asked Paul (2 Cor. 6:14). This is very important, for it is so easy to compromise here in what seems a small degree, but this can be the 'thin end of the wedge' and a dangerous policy. The Church is His Body, the family of His own, but the Gospel is for the world, and the closer our ties with Him the more effective shall we be in reaching others.

*Removing the enemy.* During Nehemiah's absence there had been a treaty of friendship between Eliashib the High Priest and Tobiah. It is true that Eliashib's name does not appear among the signatories in Ch. 10 but it cannot necessarily be inferred from that that he was not in agreement with Nehemiah's work. Seraiah's name comes first, and both Eliashib and Ezra belonged to his family, so one signature may have been given for the whole house. But it is significant that the High Priest should not merely have allied himself with Tobiah but have given him rooms (so R.V.) in the Temple, apparently removing the meal offerings and frankincense to make room for him. Some have even seen in this the suggestion that this was the room in the Temple reserved for the coming Messiah. The Christian, too, may fatally compromise himself by allowing the enemy a foothold within the sanctuary of his heart, not merely by giving way to the interests of other unconverted people, but by yielding to the dictates of his own old nature. The only safe policy is to cast him out 'bag and baggage'. We are to sanctify the Lord God in our hearts, and this involves mortifying the deeds of the flesh.

*Reforming abuses.* Three such abuses are here mentioned:

(a) Tithes. This matter was duly regulated in a businesslike way (v. 13). It is to be noted that in v. 10 the R.V. reads 'so that' instead of 'for', which means that the withdrawal to the fields by the Levites was the result of, not the reason for the non-payment of tithes. That they possessed fields at all was a violation of Deut. 18:1, so that perhaps by putting themselves in the wrong they helped to cause this non-payment, which was a violation of the covenant agreed upon in Ch. 10. Though two wrongs do not make a right, it is desirable that those who are fully engaged in the Lord's service like the Levites should see that their way of life is beyond reproach. But Nehemiah rightly rebuked the people: it was an infringement of their Law, it was a failure to carry out their recent agreement, in consequence of which the house of God was forsaken. Ch. 10 enumerated certain types of tithes, including their obligation to render their firstborn who were to be redeemed by a money payment (cf. Exod. 13:13 and Numbers 18:16). But tithes were not merely a matter of the Law: long before the giving of the Law Abraham gave Melchizedek tithes of all. The Christian is not bound by any law to give tithes but (1) as he has received greater privileges than the Jew he has the greater incentive to give, and (2) he is reminded that he is not his own as he has been bought with a price. There is a danger in interpreting this as a dedication of the life (which it does mean) and forgetting that this carries with it financial and other obligations. The Lord said that to be a disciple one must forsake all. This does not mean that the Christian parts with all his money, but he does (or should) hold it as a stewardship, as a trust for his master. If so, then it is not so difficult for him to give the Lord His portion, and in this matter he should be definite and systematic (1 Cor. 16:2). This question of giving is most important, and clearly the Lord regards it as a condition of blessing. 'Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse . . . and prove Me now herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it' (Malachi 3:10).

(b) Violation of the Sabbath: Nehemiah not merely reproved this, but he showed reasons why it was to be deplored (18). It was failure here, he argued, that had brought calamity upon the city. The O. T. principle is thus stated: the Lord saith, 'Them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed' (1 Sam. 2:30) and the context makes it clear that to be lightly esteemed means to be severely judged. Here again there was an infringement both of the Law and of their recent agreement. It was caused by a wrong sense of values, those who prized their profits or their acquisition of goods above the will of God. The Christian is not bound in any sense of legal bondage on this question, and his observance of the first day of the week commemorates a different victory, (that of the resurrection), from that of the Jewish seventh day. The restatement of the Law in Deut. Ch. 5 enforced the Sabbath as a reminder of the deliverance from Egypt, but in Exodus Ch. 20 it recalled the Creator's rest, and in this sense it is brought before us in Genesis long before the giving of the Law. God desires its observance for the purpose of worship and remembrance: quite apart from that it seems that man needs it as a rest from toil and other occupation. Words that Maclaren wrote 50 years ago seem to be gaining a new significance: 'If once the idea that Sunday is a day of amusement take root, the amusement of some will require the hard work of others, and the custom of work will tend to extend, till rest becomes the exception, and work the rule'. Some countries have moved a long way towards proving that true. Nehemiah not merely rebuked the evil, he took practical measures to prevent its repetition (19, 21, 22), and Christian parents can do much towards removing the temptation in this matter from their children.

(c) Mixed marriages: these were sternly rebuked, for compromise here means a compromised life. For a Christian to marry an unconverted person is clearly wrong, for in the first place it is disobedience to God's Word. 'Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers', wrote Paul (2 Cor. 6:14). In the second place common sense is against it, for it is bound to lead to a measure of disharmony in the married life and the home, and generally ends

in an unhappy compromise. Finally, as here, it has unfortunate results for the children with their resultant mixed speech. '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'. How many a child starts life with just such a handicap: some Christian influence from one parent to give a glimpse of better things and yet a home where they cannot flourish, and where other influences are at work. The obvious result may be to discredit the Christian message and make a conversion more difficult than for one starting in an ungodly home, where the first contact with the Gospel may be one of power in a consecrated Christian. Nehemiah's action is a salutary reminder of a great evil to be avoided.

So Nehemiah concludes his active record with a word of prayer: 'Remember me, O my God, for good.'

*Résumé of the Life of Nehemiah.* As these studies opened with the emphasis upon the importance of the man of God for the work of God, it seems well to close with a summary of the chief characteristics demonstrated in the life of Nehemiah.

(1) He was a man of *Real Pity*, with a heart at leisure from himself to sympathise and sorrow concerning Jerusalem. There are some who seem so wrapped up in their local activities that they never enquire about others, or who enquire with merely a casual interest. But here was a man whose whole career was subsequently changed because of his enquiry. How long he actually stayed in Jerusalem is impossible to say, but his heart was there! How many Christians there are who have gifts which could be used in the distant Mission field, or in some needy little assembly nearby in the Homeland, if only they would enquire and thereby gain the vision of opportunity. But if the attitude of heart which prompts such sympathies is not there, they are not yet fitted to be used.

(2) He was a man of *Ready Prayer*. Whether on the spur of the moment, or in the long sessions of prayer and fasting, he approached God in everything. He never made the mistake of relying upon his natural advantages and abilities, which were

obviously considerable, but acted upon the principle of taking everything to God in prayer.

(3) He was a man of *Responsible Position*. As King's cupbearer he held quite an important position and clearly the king had a high opinion of him to trust him as he did. Not all of us can hold important positions as the world rates them, but they are all responsible, for we are the Lord's representatives wherever we are, and as such we should so live that we are found worthy of trust as was Nehemiah. As the Lord's ambassadors we are in a position of trust for Him, and what a disappointment for Him if we fail to win the confidence and trust of our human masters. Nor did Nehemiah let his position stand in his way: he might have clung to this post under the pretext that he could best serve God by remaining there. But he used his post—at the risk of losing it—to further the work of God. Clearly for Nehemiah the best place to be in was where the Lord wanted him, if it did mean exchanging the comforts of the palace for the conflict of the city walls.

(4) He was a *Realist in Policy*. Spiritual guidance for Nehemiah did not involve any slackness in practical application. He made a point of examining the whole situation in person, made definite plans, threw himself wholeheartedly into the work, and was not afraid of the self-denial involved.

(5) He was a man *Resolute in Purpose*. He had external danger and internal disaffection to contend with, but these merely served to strengthen his resolves and to nerve him for greater endeavour. The man of God who engages in the work of God is called upon to 'endure hardness' and he must not be ignorant of the enemy's devices, but must know when and how to resist the Devil. As Nehemiah found, there will be occasions when he must not be afraid to take drastic action.

(6) He was a man of *Reliance for Power* from God. He was essentially a practical man, but not the less spiritual for that, though one sometimes meets the view that the spiritually minded man is not very practical and vice versa. But it was the practical captain Joshua who was commanded to 'mediate' on the Word of God, and the practical James who urged a similar attitude

(Jas. 1:22-25). So Nehemiah, with all his practical application, was ready to acknowledge that God put these things into his heart (Ch. 7:5) and he owned the good hand of his God upon him. Is it not true that 'the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him'? (2 Chron. 16:9).

## STUDIES IN THE GOSPELS

### The Gospel of Matthew

H. BELL

The subject of this book is the Lord Jesus Christ in the character of *The King*. It forms the necessary sequel to the Old Testament. In past times God had taught His people to expect the Messiah who would reign over them as the Son of David (e.g., as in Genesis 49:10; Isaiah 11:1, 10). Now Matthew tells us by the Spirit of God how this promise was fulfilled in Christ.

Fifty times in this book we find the word 'Kingdom', and on thirty-two occasions the phrase employed is the 'Kingdom of Heaven'—a phrase which appears nowhere else in the New Testament. The meaning of this expression can be gleaned from Daniel, chapter 2, where the prophet, having told Nebuchadnezzar of four World Empires that would arise, informs him that, *after this*, 'shall the God of Heaven set up a Kingdom'. So that when the Lord announced that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand people would realise that Daniel's prophecy was about to be fulfilled and Heaven's King was here to reign on earth.

There are three sections in the book which stand out in particular: namely, chapters 5 to 7, chapter 13, and chapters 24 and 25. In the *first* of these we learn of the Kingdom as it ought to be. That is, we are here instructed as to the principles which ought to characterise the subjects of Messiah's Kingdom. In ch. 5, we learn chiefly about the *outward* aspect; such as being peacemakers, and letting our light shine before men. Chapter 6 gives us the *inward* aspect, viz., 'secret' almsgiving; 'secret' prayer; and 'secret' fasting. Then chap. 7 links both these aspects together and shows that there must be no hypocrisy; the outward