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COMMENTARY

**DARBY'S SYNOPSIS OF THE
BOOKS OF THE BIBLE
OLD TESTAMENT**

by John Nelson Darby

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JOHN NELSON DARBY
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NEHEMIAH

The Book of Nehemiah will require but few remarks; but it is important to establish its import. It is a necessary link in the history of God's dealings, in the recital of His patience and loving-kindness towards Jerusalem, which He had chosen.

In Ezra we have seen the temple rebuilt and the authority of the law re-established among the people, who are again separated from the Gentiles, and set apart for God.

In Nehemiah we witness the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and the restoration of what may be termed the civil condition of the people, but under circumstances that definitely prove their subjection to the Gentiles.

Through grace, faith had set up the altar, and the Gentiles had had nothing to do with it, except by voluntary service; but when the city is to be rebuilt, it is the governor appointed by the Gentiles who holds the prominent place, God having touched the heart of these Gentiles and disposed them to favor His people. We see in Nehemiah himself a heart touched with the affliction of his people, a precious token of the grace of God; and He who had produced this feeling disposed the king's heart to grant Nehemiah all he desired for the good of the people and of Jerusalem. We see also in Nehemiah a heart that habitually turned to God, that sought its strength in Him, and thus surmounted the greatest obstacles.

The time in which Nehemiah labored for the good of his people was not one of those brilliant phases which, if faith be there, awaken even the energy of man, imparting to it its own luster. It was a period which required the perseverance that springs from a deep interest in the people of God, because they are His people; a perseverance which, for this very reason, pursues its object in spite of the contempt excited by the work, apparently so insignificant, but which is not the less the work of God; and which pursues it in spite of the hatred and opposition of enemies, and the faintheartedness of fellow-laborers (chap. ~~4:8~~ 4:8, 10, 11); a perseverance which, giving itself up entirely to the work, baffles all the intrigues of the enemy, and avoids every snare, God taking care of those who trust in Him.

It is also a beautiful feature in Nehemiah's character, that in spite of his high office he had all the detail of service so much at heart, and all that concerned the upright walk of God's people.

In the midst, however, of all this faithfulness, we perceive the influence of the Gentile power controlling the whole state of things. Nehemiah's arrival and even his conduct are marked with this influence. It was not faith alone that was in action, but a protecting power also (compare [Ezra 8:22](#); [Nehemiah 2:7-9](#)). Nevertheless, the separation from all that was not Jewish is carefully maintained (chap. [2:20](#); [7:65](#); [9:2](#); [10:30](#); [13:1,3, 29, 30](#)).

This history shows us, first of all, how, when God acts, faith stamps its own character on all who surround it. The Jews, who had so long left Jerusalem desolate, are quite disposed to recommence the work. Judah, however, is discouraged by the difficulties. This brings out the perseverance which characterizes true faith when the work is of God, be it ever so poor in appearance. The whole heart is in it, because it is of God. Encouraged by Nehemiah's energy, the people are ready to work and fight at the same time. For faith always identifies God and His people in the heart. And this becomes a spring of devotedness in all concerned.

Let us remark, that in times of difficulty faith does not show itself in the magnificence of the result, but in love for God's work, however little it may be, and in the perseverance with which it is carried on through all the difficulties belonging to this state of weakness; for that with which faith is occupied, is the city of God and the work of God, and these things have always the same value, whatever may be the circumstances in which they are found.

God blesses the labors of the faithful Nehemiah, and Jerusalem is once more encompassed by walls; a less touching condition than when the city of God was defended by the altar of God, which was a testimony to His presence and to the faith of those who erected it; but a condition that proved the faithfulness and loving-kindness of God, who, nevertheless, while outwardly re-establishing them, revoked no part of the judgment pronounced on His people and His city. He who rebuilt the walls was but the vicegerent of a foreign king; and it was the security of the people, and that which uprightness of heart required of them to acknowledge this; and it was done (chap. [9:37](#)). Still, God blesses them. Nehemiah recurs to the numbering of the people, according to the register of their genealogies that was drawn up at their first return from captivity, an already distant period. Thus the people are again placed in their cities.

By means of Ezra and Nehemiah, the law resumes its authority, and that at the people's own request, for God had prepared their hearts. Accordingly, God had gathered them together on the first day of the seventh month. It was really the trumpet of God, although the people were unconscious of it,

that gathered them to this new moon, which shone again in grace, whatever might be the clouds that veiled its feeble light. The people's hearts were touched by the testimony of the law, and they wept. But Nehemiah and Ezra bade them rejoice, for the day was holy. Doubtless these men of God were right. Since God was restoring His people, it became them to rejoice and give thanks.

The second day, continuing the search into the holy book they found that Israel ought to keep a feast on the fifteenth day of the same month. On restoration from chastening, when the church finds itself again before God, it often happens that precepts are recollected, which had been long forgotten and lost during the apparently better days of God's people; and with the precepts, the blessing that attends their fulfillment is recovered also. Since the days of Joshua, the children of Israel had not followed these ordinances of the law. What a lesson! This feast of tabernacles was kept with great gladness, * a touching expression of the interest with which God marked the return of His people; a partial return, it is true, and soon beclouded (and even the hope to which it gave rise entirely destroyed by the rejection of the Messiah, who should have been its crown), yet of great value, as the first fruits in grace of that restoration which will accompany Israel's turning of heart to Christ, as manifested by their saying, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of Jehovah!" The gladness was sincere and real; but everything was imperfect. The tenth day had not its antitype. Israel's humiliation had, as yet, no connection with that death which at once filled up their iniquity, and atoned for it. Their joy was well founded. It was yet but transient.

[* The feast of tabernacles was the celebration of their rest and possession of the land after passing through the wilderness. The booths marked that they had been under tents as pilgrims.]

On the twenty-fourth day, the people came together to humble themselves in a manner that became their position, and they separated themselves from all strangers. Beginning with the blessing promised to Abraham, they relate all the tokens of God's grace bestowed upon Israel, the frequent unfaithfulness of which they had afterwards been guilty, and there is a true expression of heartfelt repentance; they acknowledge without any disguise their condition (chap. ~~9~~9:36, 37), and undertake to obey the law (chap. 10), to separate themselves entirely from the people of the land, and faithfully to perform all that the service of the house of God required.

All this gives a very distinct character to their position. Acknowledging the promise made to Abraham, and the bringing in of the people to Canaan by virtue of this promise, and their subsequent failure, they place themselves again under the obligations of the law, while confessing the goodness of God who had spared them. They do not see beyond a conditional and

Mosaic restoration. Neither the Messiah nor the new covenant has any place as the foundation of their joy or of their hope. They are, and they continue to be, in bondage to the Gentiles.

This was Israel's condition until, in the sovereign mercy of God, the Messiah was presented to them. The Messiah could have brought them out of their position and gathered them under His wings, but they would not.

It is this position that the Book of Nehemiah definitely brought out. It is the king's commandment that provides for the maintenance of the singers. A Jew was at the king's hand in all matters concerning the people (chap. ^{<G112>}1:23, 24).

We have already seen that gladness was the portion of the people; a joy which acknowledged God, for God had preserved the people and had blessed them. But the princes of the people had immediately relapsed into unfaithfulness; and during Nehemiah's absence the chambers of the temple, in which the offerings had been formerly kept, were given up to Tobiah, that subtle and persevering enemy of God's people. But at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem the joy of the people and the faithfulness of Nehemiah brought them back to the written word, and Israel separated themselves again from the mixed multitude. Tobiah's stuff is cast out of the chamber prepared for him in the temple. The observance of the Sabbath is again enforced. Those who had married strange wives, and whose children spake partly the language of strangers and partly that of the Jews, are put under the curse and sharply rebuked and chastised. The order and the cleansing, according to the law, are re-established, and this leading thought of the book, as to the people's condition, closes the narrative.

That which we have said will give an idea of the great principle of this book.

I will add a few more remarks in this place.

The Book of Nehemiah places Israel, or rather the Jews, in the position they were to hold in their land until the coming of the Messiah; separate from the nations, faithful in keeping the law, but deprived of the privileges which had belonged to them as the people of God; under the yoke of the Gentiles, capable of rendering unto God the things that were God's, but deprived of His presence in their midst, as they had formerly enjoyed it in the temple; and, finally, bound to render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's. When the Messenger of the covenant came (the Son of God, who could have cleansed the temple and placed the glory there), they received Him not; and they continue under the burden of the consequences of this rejection. This is now their condition until the coming of Christ.

It is this which gives to the Book of Nehemiah its importance. Nehemiah's faith embraced those promises of God which were connected with His government--such, for instance, as those contained in ^{<OR1>}Leviticus 26. But his faith went no farther (see chap. 1). There was blessing upon this faith, and it accomplished the purposes of God; but it left Israel where they were. The precious phrase, "His mercy endureth for ever," is not found in this book. Nehemiah's faith did not rise so high. He is himself the servant of the Gentiles, and he acknowledges them. Such trust in God as is expressed in the words just quoted was linked with the altar and the temple, where Jehovah was everything to faith, and the Gentiles nothing, except as enemies (^{<OR1>}Ezra 3, 4).

Although it leaves the Jews in a much better condition than that in which they had previously stood, through the good hand of God upon them for immediate blessing, yet the Book of Nehemiah has no prophetic future, no future for faith. * The Jews are still Lo-ammi (not my people). The presence of God, sitting between the cherubim, was not with them; nor could it be, seeing that God had removed the throne into the midst of the Gentiles. I speak of His presence in the temple, the habitation of His glory. Set thus in blessing and under responsibility, the Messiah's coming was to put everything to the proof. The result disclosed an empty house, swept and garnished, from which the unclean spirit had gone out, but in which there was nothing. The unclean spirit will return, and others worse than himself with him. Having rejected Christ, this unhappy people will receive the Antichrist; but this was only manifested by the coming of Christ.

[* And where faith was not, and they had inwardly departed from God, their legal exactitude without grace in the heart became narrowness of heart and hypocrisy. Scrupulousness is not uprightness.]

In Nehemiah the people are only set, meanwhile, in this place of blessing. The prophecies of Zechariah and Haggai are connected with the work of Zerubbabel, and not with that of Nehemiah; with the simple faith that reared the altar as the means of blessing and safety. There (^{<OR1>}Zechariah 1:16) Jehovah could say that He had returned to Jerusalem with mercies, but it is "after the glory" that He will come to dwell there (chap. ^{<OR2>}2:8-13). The prophecy encourages them by blessing, and promises them the coming of Christ, and the presence of Jehovah at a still future period. Chapter 8 of the same prophet connects these two things together to encourage the people to walk uprightly; but it will be seen in reading it that the fulfillment is there clearly marked as taking place at the end of the age, the rejection of Christ (chap. 11) becoming the occasion of the judgments that were to fall upon them, and to give occasion, in a still more striking manner, for that sovereign grace which will use the power of the rejected Messiah for the

deliverance of His people, when they are utterly ruined in consequence of their sin.

The prophecy of Malachi, which was uttered after this, declares and denounces the corruption already brought in after the blessing restored in a measure by mercy; and the coming of Jehovah in judgment.

To these remarks it may be added, that neither in Zechariah nor in Haggai does the Lord call the people, My people. It is said, prophetically, that this shall be the case in the time to come, in the latter days, when Christ shall come to establish His glory. But the judgment pronounced in Hosea has never been revoked, and there is not one expression used that could gainsay it.

The Book of Nehemiah gives us, then, the partial and outward re-establishment of the Jews in the land, without either the throne of God or the throne of David, while waiting for the manifestation of the Messiah, and His coming to seek for the fruit of so much grace; in a word, their restoration, in order that He may be presented to them. The people are provisionally in the land, on God's part, but under the power of the Gentiles who possess the throne.