

NEHEMIAH

NEHEMIAH 1-6 — BUILDING THE WALLS

PRAYER AND ITS ANSWER (CHAPS. 1-2:8)

In this book it is to be kept in mind that the previous commissions to Zembabel and Ezra concerned only the repair of the temple at Jerusalem, and certain internal arrangements for the moral and material well-being of the people in their home towns. The walls and gates of the city, however, were still in the ruined condition in which they were left by Nebuchadnezzar after the siege. The consequences were detrimental to the people's peace, for such protection was practically their only defense against assaulting enemies.

Chislev was an early winter month. Shushan was the winter, as Ecbatana was the summer palace, of the Persian monarchs. Hanani may have been simply a relative, as we have seen how loosely these kinships are referred to (1:1-2).

Nehemiah, though nothing more is stated of him, is likely to have been, like Zerubbabel, of the royal family of David, and certainly he was a great patriot. Study his prayer carefully (vv. 4-11). Notice its deep earnestness (v. 4), unselfishness (v. 6), humility (vv. 6-7), faith (vv. 8-9) and definiteness (v. 11). A cup-bearer to an oriental potentate (v. 12) held a confidential and influential office, affording him frequent access to his presence. At the meal he presented the cup of wine to the king, and since the likelihood of its being poisoned was ever present, he must be one in whom the greatest trust was reposed. Not infrequently, as a precautionary measure, the cup-bearer must first taste the wine in the king's presence before presenting it.

Four months elapsed between chapters one and two, though the cause is unknown. Nisan (2:1) was in the Spring. It awakened suspicion to appear before majesty with a sad countenance (v. 2), but in this case it gave Nehemiah his opportunity (vv. 3-8). The queen may have been Esther, though it is uncertain. God receives the glory (v. 8).

PROGRESS OF THE WORK (CHAPS. 2:9; 3:32)

"Beyond the river" means east of the Euphrates. "Governors" were in charge of the Persian dependencies in proximity to Judah (v. 9). "Horonite" seems to refer to a Moabitish town of that name. The Ammonite "Tobiah the servant" may mean that he was a freed slave elevated to official dignity. Nehemiah enters on his task by a night survey of the ruins (vv. 12-16). Then he addresses the leaders, stirring them by his example and information about the king's commission (vv. 17-18). The opponents (v. 19) were doubtless supporters or leaders of the Samaritans, met with in Ezra.

The priests take the lead in the work (3:1). The residents of Jericho have a section assigned them (v. 2), and other great families follow to the end of the chapter. Their names are recorded because the work was one not only of patriotism, but godly devotion, calling for faith, courage, and self-sacrifice.

HINDRANCES (CHAPS. 4-6)

Ridicule was the first form the hindrances took (vv. 1-6), but Nehemiah made his appeal to God and continued the work until the wall was built "half the height" (RV). If his language in prayer seems harsh, recall what we have learned about Israel's position as God's witness and instrument in blessing the world. To frustrate her is to frustrate God, and work the sorest injury to human kind. These enemies are not personal to Nehemiah, but the enemies of God and of all the earth. Moreover, Nehemiah himself is not undertaking to visit punishment upon them, but committing them to God who doeth righteously.

Physical force was the next form of hindrance (vv. 7-23), but Nehemiah provided against it by day and night watches (v. 9), by arming the workmen (v. 13), and by detaining them all in Jerusalem (v. 22).

The hindrance of chapter five was not the same as the others, and did not arise from the outside, but it was a hindrance, nevertheless, that must have greatly weakened their hands (vv. 1-5). Nehemiah's action was bold and efficient. An assembly was called (v. 7), his own example cited (vv. 8-10), an appeal made (v. 11), a solemn agreement effected (vv. 12-13). The verses following testify to the wealth of Nehemiah as well as his unselfish patriotism. Not only declining the emoluments of his office, he maintained

an expensive establishment for the public good, and this for twelve years (v. 14). He appears self-righteous (v. 19), but he was not living in the Gospel dispensation.

In chapter six the external enemies once more come into view, whose policy has changed from ridicule and force to crafty diplomacy (vv. 1-4) with threats superadded (vv. 5-9). Nor are there wanting traitors within his own camp who seek Nehemiah's ruin, but in vain (vv. 10-15). Notice the intended disrespect in the "open" letter, which, in the case of so distinguished an official as Nehemiah (v. 5), should have been sealed, after the Persian custom. These were indeed "troubulous times" (~~2025~~ Daniel 9:25), but the man for the times had arrived.

QUESTIONS

1. What material feature distinguishes the periods of the two books, Ezra and Nehemiah?
2. What is the meaning of "cup-bearer"?
3. What outstanding features mark the character of Nehemiah?
4. What is the geographical designation of the enemies of Judah?
5. Name the three classes of hindrances emanating from them.
6. What were the hindrances of an internal character?
7. How long was the work in progress?

NEHEMIAH 7-13 — INTERNAL REGULATIONS

A NEW GENEALOGICAL RECORD (CHAP. 7)

The need for this assignment of duty to the two men named (v. 2), is not apparent unless Nehemiah contemplated a return to Persia. Later it will be seen that such return took place, but whether at this time or not, is not clear. To "fear God above many," as Hananiah did, is a great commendation. It was customary to open the gates of a city at sunrise, but to do so in this case before the inhabitants were well awake and stirring, might put them at a disadvantage before their enemies (v. 3). The new walls were built on the old foundations, but the city they enclosed did not as yet hold the old population, which explains verse four.

The genealogical record (v. 5) was doubtless from Zerubbabel's day recorded in the book of Ezra, and if some differences are discovered between this and that, they may be accounted for by the different circumstances in the two cases. The first was prepared at Babylon and this in Judea, with almost a century intervening. Of course a particular object of this record was the purification of the priestly and Levitical line with reference to the temple service.

A SPIRITUAL REVIVAL (CHAPS. 8-10)

It was in the seventh month (7:73), at the feast of tabernacles, that the stirring event of this chapter occurred. Ezra is in Jerusalem still, though during Nehemiah's governorship he has not been at the forefront. It may be that his time has been spent in preparing that edition of the Old Testament which has been associated with his name. His great usefulness is seen at this juncture (vv. 1-8). Here is a great open-air meeting, and the Word of God has the place of honor. It is simply read and explained to the people, but as usual with mighty results. Behold the blessing which comes to a people when to a faithful ministry is added a godly ruler (vv. 8-15). Pastors will appreciate a good text for Thanksgiving Day in verse 10. There is nothing which brings such joy to people as a knowledge of God's Word, and nothing that makes them so practically mindful of others.

This feast proves a "protracted meeting" and is followed by a fast and other evidences of repentance (v. 9). Between the morning and evening sacrifices they devoted three hours to the Scriptures and three hours to prayer. Read the prayer carefully, which seems to have been uttered by the Levites on the "stairs," or pulpits, erected for the purpose, in the open. Perhaps we have here only the substance of the prayers, or it may be that Ezra prepared a general prayer for all to use. Notice the pathos of verses 36-37, and the covenant in which the proceeding ended (v. 38 and 10:1-39).

The points of this covenant are interesting. They bind themselves to abstain from heathen marriages (v. 30), to observe the Sabbath, to give the land its seventh year rest, and remit debts in that year (v. 31), maintain the temple service and support the priests (vv. 32-39).

A PATRIOTIC PRECAUTION (CHAPS. 11-12)

This measure (vv. 1-2) was necessary to insure a proper guard for the capital. And as it involved danger and self-sacrifice on the part of the

drafted ones they merited the public gratitude. Their names follow, and include the "Nethinim," a designation difficult to determine, but supposed to mean the descendants of the Gibeonites of Joshua's time, who were constrained to be hewers of wood and drawers of water. In any event they were men of humble rank in the service of the sanctuary. Various editorial comments occur in this chapter whose elucidation, in the lapse of time, is not easy. Some of these are the "second over the city" (v. 9), "ruler of the house of God" (v. 11), "the outward business" (v. 16), "the principal to begin," etc. (v. 17), referring in general terms to assistants of the priests, collectors of provisions, leaders of the choirs, etc.

We may include in this division the dedication of the wall (12:27-47), in which the leaders, accompanied by the singers and people from all parts of the land marched around it, pausing at different points for praise and prayer, and the presentation of sacrifices. Some idea of the religious hilarity of the occasion may be gathered from verse 43. The explanation of verse 45 seems to be that the officials named saw that no persons ceremonially unclean entered the temple. This was the duty of the porters ordinarily (^{42:19}2 Chronicles 23:19), but on special occasions singers were called on to assist.

A MORAL HOUSECLEANING (CHAP. 13)

Nehemiah has reported at the Persian court and again, after an unknown period, returned to Jerusalem (v. 6), and finding there great laxity in regard to the temple service, Sabbath observance, and heathen marriages, all of which he vigorously reforms. Eliashib's offense is the more reprehensible because of his sacred office (vv. 4-5) — turning the house of God into a palace for the entertainment of his heathen relatives. It was to be expected that such conduct of the high priest would affect the people as shown in the verses following (vv. 10-14). When, however, the worship of God is neglected, his laws are generally dishonored (vv. 15-18). Note Nehemiah's decisive action in this case (vv. 19-22), and the pattern it affords for modern executives. There is this difference, however, that Nehemiah was an official over a people who had a fear of God in their hearts. Our executives serve a democracy where the people themselves are esteemed as the highest authority. "How far will the people sustain us?" is the question before their eyes in the performance of duty, and the execution of the laws. No wonder that their actions are often marked by timidity and insincerity. It will be only in the millennial age, which may God hasten, that conditions

will produce and maintain governors of Nehemiah's type. Verse 25 shows that he was not influenced by the sentimentalism of these times to substitute reformatory measures in the place of punishment for wrongdoing.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the commendation of Hananiah?
2. What explains the particularity as to genealogical records?
3. What may have been Ezra's great task at this period?
4. Tell the story of the revival of this period in your own words.
5. Who probably, were the Nethinim?
6. What three reforms are entered upon after Nehemiah's return from Persia?
7. What hinders executives such as he, today?