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Nehemiah - The Building of a City

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcribed from a message given in July, 1958. The spoken form has been retained verbatim.

I have, dear friends, been led in recent days (especially during this past week) back in a very spontaneous way into the book of Nehemiah, which I am more and more impressed has a message, a real message, for God's church today.

There is far too much in it for even a reminder this morning. He may be intending more some other time, but there is perhaps a thing or two that He would have us consider this morning in this book of Nehemiah. Not turning you to any particular part of it, you can take it from the first words if you like: "The history..." the margin says, "The history of Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah". The very presence of that name at the head of this book is significant and impressive, because it was not there at the beginning. There was no book called "the Book of Nehemiah" in the Old Testament, until a very much later time this book united with Ezra in the Hebrew Bible; it was known as the first and second books of Ezra. But there came a time when, and we need not stay with the details, when they were separated into two books in this way and given the names of the two men mostly in view in their sections: Ezra and Nehemiah. It does seem that there was something of the sovereignty of God. That is the point that I want you to notice. I think it is very impressive about giving this man's name to this part of the history and what it contains.

There are a lot of names in this book, probably if you do read through the whole book, there is one chapter that you won't read through; that is chapter 10. It is just a book full of names, and a lot of peculiar names at that! You just skip that when you read through. I think we make a mistake if we do

it, for this reason: that neither Nehemiah, nor any of those people whose names are mentioned - and they are a fairly large company - would ever have come to be known, would ever have come to have a place in the Bible as Bible names, but for their relationship to the purpose of God in their time. That is, I say, impressive and that is very significant.

We should probably never have known that there was such a man as Nehemiah and we certainly should not have had any of all those other names, which are on record in Holy Scripture (and we could say in heaven), but for their relationship to the purpose of God in the time in which they lived.

Nehemiah was not a king, he was not a priest, and he was not a prophet. Who he was... well, all we know is that he was "the son of Hacaliah". Search that out, try and make something of that, find out something about that if you like! We know that he was a cup-bearer in the palace of Artaxerxes. That was an important position of honour; he was evidently a man of some character and distinction - the book makes all that perfectly clear, but as to any of the great official capacities, such as priests, kings, and prophets, he was none of these. We could say he was just a man; he was a man. And who all these people were... well, the Lord only knows. We have got a lot of names.... who they were? All that was not being taken account of by the Lord: who they were in themselves, that was not the point, but here they are: they are a part of this very vital history in Israel and a part of this movement of God. And indeed it's a movement of God that is being recorded here; a tremendous amount behind it that is just the Lord.

They were... they came to be known and put into this Bible, this immortal book, just for the one reason only: not what they were in themselves, *but* because of their relationship to what was God's specific purpose... *specific* purpose in the time in which they lived. There was a Divine sovereignty behind that. Divine sovereignty just means that it must be God. It is not Divine sovereignty if it is man's importance and man's ability, man's qualifications, and you can put it down to anything in man, and say: "Well, he or she being such a person, having such abilities and qualifications, and position, and influences, and resources, well, what would you expect but that such a one should do something outstanding?" It is not like that, Divine sovereignty just means that where anything is done, it is God, and God alone and where people are chosen to do it, they are chosen of God for no other reason than that *He* chooses them. *He chooses to choose them*. It is God.

But there *is* another side, which is very clear in this book, that while, undoubtedly the Divine sovereignty was at work behind both Nehemiah and the people with him, there was the other side, not of ability, for the story shows how imperfect these people were... how easy it was even for them to lose heart, and give up, and delay, and so on. Nevertheless, it is perfectly clear that both Nehemiah and the people had a heart committal to that which God desired in their time. We know that to be true of Nehemiah, the enemies were wrath that there was a man who had come to seek the good of the people. And all that we know about him, especially in the early part of the book, shows how this man's *heart* was bound up with this situation and with God's honour and glory in it - something that really was a burden, a distress, a concern, of Nehemiah's. And it comes out with the people too, in a very real way. The people had a mind to work, they had a very real heart concern for what God particularly wanted in their time, in their lifetime. Those two sides always go together, that is, God's sovereignty working and choosing, and man's response to God's need. Now the point is this: when you put those two things together (and you cannot have the one without the other) when you put those two things together, God gives a significance to life and to the lives, which they would *never* have but for a discovery that God desires such-and-such a thing in our day, and for us there is nothing else in life, but that God should find His satisfaction in that.

You may put yourself among these many in chapter 10 - people, not more than names really here - a whole group, crowd, perhaps ordinary people. At any rate, I repeat, they would never have been mentioned or had any place, but for this particular purpose of God in their lives. You may put yourself in such a category, I think we are all there; we're all there. And, dear friends, naturally we may count for little or nothing; we may never come to anything at all. The majority of us would not be anything, of any account at all in life, or little account in life; we spend our life, do our work, perhaps do a lot of good things, pass on, and that is the end of the story, so far as our lives here are concerned. It's bound to be like that *unless* there is a *linking in*, by Divine sovereignty on the one side and by our response and committal on the other, to the thing that God has in view in *our* day.

Let there be no mistaking it: God has a purpose in our day. God is committed to a thing, very near to His heart, in our time. And our value, our place in Divine records, our name, our history, our significance, is going to be entirely governed by this: how far we served the purpose, *the* purpose of God, and were governed by it in our day and in our generation. To be so linked in with the Lord is to give to people and to life a significance beyond anything that would obtain, at best, otherwise. Now, you see, this is the situation here: God willed that this work should be done. God willed and purposed that what these people came to do should be done in their time - there's no doubt about it, that was God's purpose in their time and that purpose of God in their time did these three things:

First of all, it brought God into evidence.

This is a book with God in evidence, there's no doubt about that! These two books combined into one, Ezra and Nehemiah, are a record of God coming in, *in evidence*. There is no mistaking that in this. We call it "Divine sovereignty". Go away there into the captivity and see the movement of the Divine sovereignty to have this... see the people coming back under the hand of God and see God here with them in this work. It is not all easy, it's true, but the verdict is, "So the work was finished... So the wall was built". And what a testimony... when you think of all that they met, all that with which they had to contend, all the opposition, all the difficulties, all the discouragements in their own hearts, and the complications of the situation outside and the enemies from every direction. But the end: the wall was built, the work was finished. That's a testimony to God; to God. It is going to be like that, dear friends, it's going to be like that.

In the much larger purpose of God, we may feel at times that the whole thing is impossible... too much. We find the discouragement in our own hearts, we find the opposition on the outside, we find all the complications associated with this purpose of God, but it's going to be finished. In the end, the verdict is going to be the same, "So the work was finished... So the wall was built". It was a completed thing. God never undertakes something that He cannot see through. It will be like that, but it's the purpose that brings God into evidence - not just ourselves, our significance - it's the purpose with which we are bound up.

The second thing is it was the purpose that brought both Nehemiah and these people into view at all.

They would, as I have said, never have been heard of, never have been known, their names would never have been in the Bible and never would they have had a place in sacred history, but for the purpose of God. You see what that means: it is the purpose of God that will bring any of us into the place of the *eternal* accountability, accountableness. It will be the purpose of God that brings immortality into our history. And if we are ever known or heard of, it will be for that reason at all:

God took account of hearts and lives that had what was nearest to His heart on their hearts as their chief concern.

But there was this third aspect of the story: it was this purpose that enraged the enemy.

It was the purpose of God which brought all these enemies into being at all, or brought them out in their antagonism. The opposition was many-sided, varied, but very persistent. Why? Well really, Nehemiah in himself, again, wasn't so much to be taken account of. And these people? Well, who were they? There was a time when they tried the line of discounting and of scorn... ridicule... even for the people and for the work: "What do these *feeble*, these *feeble* Jews?" Well, it's quite true. All right, you're quite right about that. And even their wall, "If a fox go up against it, it will tumble down". Well, it may be poor work from this world's standpoint, nothing very massive, very wonderful, doing their best... There's nothing on that side to enrage these enemies... simply the purpose of God that drew it all out.

You cannot explain a lot of opposition... there's really no sense in it, no reason for it from any human standpoint. Who *are* the people? What *are* the people? What *is* the work that they're doing? It doesn't stand alongside the wonderful things that many are doing, even in the religious world. Let's look at it: what is it? Look at them, what are they? And yet, and yet it seems to be worth their while to fight in every conceivable way to destroy and to spoil. Isn't it true? You cannot explain it on any other ground than that there is something here that God purposes, and the devil knows that. It is the purpose, not the people and not the thing, but the *purpose of God* that stirs hell, and brings out the opposition.

Well, I must leave it there, for our time's exhausted, but it would be perhaps leaving you somewhat in the air if I did not remind you that these men and their fellow-workers, Ezra and Nehemiah, were rebuilding Jerusalem. They were rebuilding Jerusalem. Nehemiah's part was perhaps mainly the wall, not altogether by any means, but the wall comes very much into view with him. They were really rebuilding the city. And you know, Satan always sees a fuller significance in things than men do.

Again it is impressive that when God took His first steps in this nation of Israel, and called Abraham, called Abraham... the first of this nation, he forsook an earthly city and we are told he looked for a heavenly City. It was a city that was in the vision of Abraham... the first. And all along this City of Jerusalem has had such a large place, hasn't it?

In those, in those ages in those centuries - a city - and we know quite well that it is no earthly city that is God's object. This is only, after all, symbolic of something more. And so when we reach the end of the Bible, in the very last chapters, we have the City: "He took me up into a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of Heaven". We know that is not just a city - that is a people, that's the people of God.

But the point that I want to make here before I close, is this. When that City is seen, or that people in terms of a City, in the symbolism of a city, is seen coming out of Heaven, it's something already complete. The building of that City is not going to begin at the end of time with the beginning of eternity. It's complete at the end of time. It comes in complete with the beginning of eternity; it's complete! When then was it built? That was not built in an hour, in a day. When was it built? It must have taken a long time to build that City, to form that people after that character... when? Dear friends, it's being done today. It's being done here in this company this very morning - the City is

being built and *you are in the building of the City*. You're a part of it that you're being built into; the character of that City is being built into you. It's going on now!

The work will be *done* when the Heavens open, and the church comes forth: a completed work. It's going on now. We are in this thing that God has foreshadowed in Abraham and in Israel; we are in the spiritual reality of it now, it's going on. We are called according to this purpose, to be... what? *A people embodying all the essentials, the essence of God's thought concerning a people* - that's Jerusalem - the embodiment of God's *full* thought for a people. That's the purpose: to stand there at the centre of the Universe, God having got that upon which His heart was set, to have Himself expressed in a people. That's what He is doing now. He is going on.

We are committed to that. Are we? Are we with Nehemiah and with this people, in heart saying, "God has set His heart upon having a people, a City, a church which embodies His thoughts and His character"; are we committed to that? It will be that that will give the eternal significance to us, and to our having been here.

Again I come back to it: how much of the Lord, how much of the Lord and what the Lord desires... that is the thing which determines our place and our measure in the eternal interests of God. Think about that and may the Lord show us that this tremendous work of building, building, building, is *the* thing to which He has committed Himself. Our New Testament is so unfortunate, isn't it, in its translation of that word... how again and again and again the original word for "building" is translated "edifying". Misleading, isn't it? "Unto edifying", "unto edification" no, no! The word is "unto *building*"! "Unto building..." this is the book of *building*. God is at work on *building* according to Christ. And if our hearts are with Him in that, and we labour with our hearts, as did these people, and are as devoted as was this man, there will be given to our having been here, although very insignificant and unimportant people, there will have been given a meaning and a value beyond anything that we could be or have otherwise.