

The Message of Nehemiah

by G. Campbell Morgan

The book of Nehemiah teaches that 'The just shall live by his faith' and that faith is the key to living a life of obedience to God.

Scripture: Nehemiah 1:2-4, Nehemiah 2:4, Nehemiah 4:9, Isaiah 41:10, Isaiah 50:10, Habakkuk 2:4, Malachi 4:4, Matthew 5:14-16, Galatians 3:24, Hebrews 8:13

Topics: "Faith in Action", "Overcoming Adversity"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the enduring values found in the book of Nehemiah, illustrating how Nehemiah's faith was characterized by concern, confidence, and cooperation. He highlights Nehemiah's cautious yet courageous actions in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, demonstrating a refusal to compromise with external and internal opposition. The sermon draws parallels between Nehemiah's time and the present, urging believers to trust in God amidst darkness and to actively engage in their faith without compromise. Ultimately, Morgan concludes that the just shall live by faith, a principle that remains relevant in every generation.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

The Clay in its Attitude.

"The just shall live by his faith."

I. The Attitude

i. Concern. Expressed in Enquiry and Sorrow. (1:2,4).

ii. Confidence. Expressed in Prayer and Sorrow. (1:5-2:4, 4:9).

iii. Cooperation. Expressed in Activity.

II. The Activity

i. Caution. His Secret Examination.

His Arrangements for Division of Labour.

ii. Courage. The Single-handed Start.

The Invincible Determination.

iii. No Compromise.

a. With those outside.

Contempt.

Conspiracy.

Cunning.

b. With those inside.

The Nobles.

Those Disloyal.

III. The Achievement

i. The City.

a. Walls.

b. People.

ii. The Law.

a. Expounded.

b. Enforced.

iii. The Purpose.

A Highway flung up.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

Stated.

Habakkuk 2:4.

Isaiah 50:10.

I. The Darkness

The Prophecy of Malachi.

The indifferent Multitudes.

The wide-spread Disloyalty to Truth.

The Lack of Enthusiasm.

II. The Life of Faith

Is sure of God.

Acts with Him, and for Him.

Declines all Compromise.

Trusts God.

THERE is a very special interest attaching to this book, from the fact that it is the last fragment of inspired Hebrew history. Both in the Hebrew Scriptures, and in all the earlier manuscripts of the Christian Scriptures, Ezra and Nehemiah appear as one book. Subsequently they appear as two, under the titles, the first and second books of Ezra. The name Nehemiah was first given to the second part of this one book in the writings of Jerome. In the Wycliffe translation they are called the first and second books of Esdras. In the Miles Coverdale translation they are entitled, the first book of Esdras, and the second book of Esdras, otherwise called Nehemias. In the Geneva Bible, published in 1560, they first appeared. named as we have them in our Bibles, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. One story is commenced in the book of Ezra, and completed in this book of Nehemiah. The period covered by the two books was about one hundred and ten years. Under Zerubbabel and Ezra, inspired and influenced by the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah, the temple was rebuilt. We have the story of: the beginning, the delay and the resumption of the work, the whole period covering about twenty-one years. Then an interval of sixty years was followed by the reformation under Ezra. Another interval of thirteen years, and then Nehemiah and Ezra together built the walls. Yet another interval of twelve years followed, of which we have no details, and then Nehemiah instituted the final reformation. The book ends as incompletely and as unsatisfactorily in some senses as does the book of the Acts. That is not to say that the book is incomplete and unsatisfactory, but just when we would like to know a great deal more it ceases. Enough, however, is chronicled for the purpose for which the book was written.

Now let us look at the history as seen in the light of the Divine economy. As history merely, it is the history of a decadent people, the story of a ruined economy. It is pitiful in the light of the former things; their making; that triumphal deliverance, by which they emerged from a mob into an organized people; the conquests under Joshua; and the kingdom under David. All that is left is a poor remnant, paying tribute; rebuilding the temple, frightened in the midst of the work, leaving it for long years, taking it up again and bringing it to such completion that the old men wept as they remembered the former glory; passing away into formalism and backsliding, until a new reformation called them to return. Then a long, long period of silence; presently Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the wall, a wonderful piece of work; then a relapse, until we see a new reformation made necessary by the fact that they are failing to support the Levites, are neglecting the Sabbath, and are not bringing tithes to the house of God. It is a dark and sorry page of human history.

If, however, we look at this history as in the light of the Divine economy, there are three points of supreme interest. First, the People; secondly, the Purpose; and, finally, the Potter.

Look first, then, at the people. In the book of Nehemiah they are seen without any conscious national influence; and it is a very interesting and almost startling fact that in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and

Esther there is no reference at all to any Messianic hope. Through all the former books there have been references.

Malachi prophesied a century later than Nehemiah, and in his message there is the clearest Messianic reference; but there is no fragment in these books to show that these people had any Messianic hope at all. Nehemiah has consolidated a remnant in a city with walls. Long centuries before a man living in a city was discontented with it, having had a vision of the City of God. He turned his back upon Ur of the Chaldees, because it was a city of men, with all the characteristics of cities which men build, and set himself out upon a pilgrimage to find the City of God. The centuries have run their course, and, in the last piece of inspired history, the people coming from his loins, having been governed by God, guided by God, and guarded by God, are seen in a city. Is that Abraham's hope? Is that the ultimate?

When they began to rebuild the temple, in order to inspire them, Haggai and Zechariah prophesied, and one of the visions of the prophecy of Zechariah had reference to a city. A young man is seen going to measure the city in ruins, and he is warned that he cannot measure the ultimate city which will be without walls, not needing material defense, too large to be enclosed within walls. Now I see the city with the walls completed, a great victory for the time being, for the shutting out of certain enemies, and the creation of a sense of citizenship and nationality in the hearts of this poor remnant of people. That is the last picture. Yet though Nehemiah has built walls to exclude enemies, the worst enemies cannot be excluded. They are still inside. Somewhere between fifty and one hundred years later Malachi came, and we read his prophecy to know the things inside the walls, the evil, failure and disaster that Nehemiah could not exclude.

Thus, with all the background in long perspective, of victory after victory, deliverance after deliverance, glory after glory, we see this city that Nehemiah flings the wall around. It is so poor a city that one of his enemies laughed at his walls, and said a fox could break through them.

Now what does all this mean? In the letter to the Hebrews we find the answer. "That which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away." The writer of the letter was quoting the prophecy of Jeremiah, the predictions of which are so closely associated with the period at which we are looking, although he prophesied at least one hundred and thirty years before Nehemiah. Jeremiah had declared that in seventy years there should be restoration. At the end of the seventy years, Zerubbabel and Joshua led back the remnant. In the midst of the prophecy of Jeremiah there are grouped the prophecies of hope, in which he declared that at last there should be a new covenant, not external, but internal, written upon the heart. The writer of the letter quoted that prophecy, and then proceeded to show why there was need for a new covenant, "That which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away." That is the picture that the book of Nehemiah gives of the people in the economy of God.

Now let us turn to the purpose of God in this period of Nehemiah. The central section of the book tells the story of the reading of the law. Following the reading of the law, the great prayer of the Levites. Following the prayer of the Levites, the covenant made with the remnant. Malachi, from fifty to a hundred years afterwards, uttered the last injunction to these people, before the coming of John the Baptist and Christ: "Remember ye the law of Moses My servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments." The last injunction of the last prophet spoken to these people, spoken to the very conditions described in the book of Nehemiah, was: "Remember ye the law." Once again I turn to my New Testament, and, in Paul's Galatian letter, read: "Before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us

unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith." That is the key to the history which begins with the reading of the law under Nehemiah. That is what the law was doing in Nehemiah's day, and continued to do for four hundred years. "The law was our schoolmaster." "Tutor" is the meaning of the word "schoolmaster." We have taken the Greek word and Anglicized it, and we speak of a pedagogue and pedagogy; but the pedagogue was not the teacher in Greece, and the law was not a teacher in Judaism. The pedagogue was the man who saw to it that the boy went to school, not the man who taught him. Paul used the word correctly. He says we were kept in ward by the law.

Now, mark what was happening in the city under Nehemiah. The civil reformation as a secondary thing to that wonderful reading of the law. These people had utterly failed, in spite of priest and prophet. The law was left, and that law was enunciated among the broken remnant, and became their custodian. It held them in ward, kept them all the prisoners of God through four hundred years, notwithstanding their frivolity and triviality. When Christ came there were no priests worthy the name; no king, save one who paid tribute, and was himself corrupt; no prophet, save His own immediate herald; but the law was there. The Divine purpose, as seen in Nehemiah, was that of putting the people under law, locking them up, until the faith should come. That is the Divine movement which is manifest in this book.

The last matter is that of the Potter Himself - God - still at work putting His hand upon His people, making them again in spite of themselves. I need not enlarge upon that I should feel that we had disastrously failed in our attempt to glean the messages of these books if that truth of the overruling, reigning God had not been clearly seen. What I do ask you to notice is the instrument of the Potter. Nehemiah was not a king, was not a priest, was not a prophet. The three great orders through which God had reigned and ruled are absent. They have all failed. I think it is quite likely that Nehemiah was of the royal line of David, but he was neither king nor prince. He was a cupbearer at the court of an alien. He did not reign over these people as king. He was not a priest offering sacrifices. He was not a prophet, so far as the Hebrew people were concerned. He was a citizen, one of themselves, and withal one into whose blood the iron of the captivity had entered, one into whose heart the sorrows of his people's failures had come. The king had failed and was set aside. The prophet I will not say had failed as the king had failed, for he had delivered his message, but it had not been persuasive. The priest was corrupt, though still in the midst. Then God took a common man, and made him neither king, nor priest, nor prophet, but a plain, blunt man, who went right on and flung up a wall in seven weeks, and made a chance for the law to be read and expounded.

It is evident that the supreme interest centers in Nehemiah. The nation had failed; prophet, priest and king had failed; but here was a man, and this man embodied the supreme principle.

The permanent value of the book is its illustration of the truth, "The just shall live by his faith." That is to return to the book of Joshua, the first in the present series. Joshua was neither king nor prophet nor priest, and the lesson of his history is, "The just shall live by his faith." The last fragment of the historic portion of the Hebrew Bible has that as its supreme message also, through Nehemiah, but the circumstances are different. They may be described by a quotation from Isaiah: "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of His servant? He that walketh in darkness, and hath no light, let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God."

Nehemiah is a most radiant revelation of the fulfillment of that charge. Nehemiah feared the Lord, obeyed the voice of His servant, walked in circumstances of darkness where there was no light, yet trusted in the name of the Lord and stayed upon his God. That is to say, "The just shall live by his faith." In one man the great principle is revealed. Notice, then, in the midst of circumstances of darkness: the attitude of faith, the

activity of faith, and the achievement of faith.

The attitude of faith was that of perfect confidence in God. From first to last Nehemiah's faith in God never wavered. It was, moreover, that of concern about the purpose of God. Hear these brief words, "I asked . . . concerning the Jews and Jerusalem." Hear these briefer words, "I sat down and wept." Finally, it was that of cooperation with God. That is clearly revealed in our next consideration.

The activity of faith as illustrated in the case of Nehemiah was, first, that of extreme caution. He went up alone. He did not tell anyone what he was doing, but went silently round to see where the wall needed the most attention, and in order to obtain at first hand all the facts of the case. Then when he did declare himself and began his building, with fine discriminative caution, he divided the work among the people, so that every man built over against his own house. After caution, courage. A single-handed start to build a ruined wall and restore a lost order, and invincible determination. The book thrills and throbs and pulsates with the tremendous force of this man's will. Caution and courage. The two things we revealed together in one brief statement. Caution, "I consulted with myself." Courage, "I contended with the nobles."

In the activity of faith as here illustrated there was not only caution and courage, but no compromise. No compromise with the foes without. The story of the opposition against Nehemiah from without can be told in three words: Contempt, Conspiracy, Chastening. They spoke of his work with contempt. He declared, in reply, that the work would be done, but they would not be allowed to help. Then they tried to hinder him by conspiracy, but he proved himself to be a man of keen eyes! Finally, they tried to catch him with cunning, and he replied with fine satire, I am doing a great work. Why should I come down to you? No compromise with foes within. He found foes within, for the nobles were exacting usury from the poorer people. It was then he said, "I consulted with myself," and "I contended with the nobles." There came an hour when a priest allowed the enemy lodging room in the temple, and Nehemiah flung his furniture out, and he "contended with them, and cursed them, and plucked off their hair." No compromise. That is the final fact in faith's activity.

And once more, a glance at faith's achievement. The wall was built in seven weeks. He gathered his people, and if some of them were loath to go up to Jerusalem because of the difficulty he compelled them; others he scattered through the towns and villages. Then followed the greatest achievement, the exposition of the law.

In the last analysis, Nehemiah's achievement was that he flung up a highway for God, provided Him with vantage ground on which to stand and wait, until, to quote Paul's great word, "the faith," should come. It is a fine ending to inspired history.

If that be the permanent value, the living message is stated in two quotations I have already made: "The just shall live by his faith," and "who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of His servant? He that walketh in darkness, and hath no light, let him trust in the name of the Lord and stay upon his God." The book of Nehemiah brings this message to every period of darkness. I will not stay to apply it to personal life, but to larger life. Is this an hour of dark outlook? I am afraid in all honesty I must say to you that it does so seem to me. I could certainly, so far as I am concerned, take the prophecy of Malachi, and preach it as it stands to this day and generation. I think there is a wonderful and almost tragic similarity between the last condition of the Hebrew people and the hour in which we live. All about us are indifferent multitudes. Far more widespread than some of us think, is incipient, and sometimes open disloyalty to the Truth of God. On the other hand, there is a lack of enthusiasm about the things of

Christ-languishing foreign Missionary Societies. It is not my ordinary custom to speak thus of the age. I do it now to reveal why I do not very often do it. The true attitude of faith, in any hour of darkness, hour of peril, such as I believe we are in at the present moment, is, first, that it is sure of God. It has no hopeless dirge to chant upon the sunless air. In the second place, faith acts with God, and for God, in strenuous endeavor. The man who nurses his orthodoxy, and does nothing for God, is a liar and a hypocrite. If you believe in evangelical faith, you are out upon the evangelistic path; whether it be at home or abroad matters nothing. The man who is evangelical believes in the doctrines of sin and grace, believes that men will be lost, and lost irrevocably unless saved through the Cross. If we believe these things we must put blood and sweat into the business of saving men. Faith is first sure of God. It then acts with God and for God. Finally, it declines all compromise with foes outside or inside. Faith trusts God as Nehemiah did, does its own day's work, and leaves all the future to Him. In the presence of this study, I have only one thing to say: "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief."

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