

Hope for Zion

by Iain Murray

The sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing the true cause of the church's condition and seeking renewed obedience and repentance in order to experience revival and restoration.

Scripture: Matthew 13:23, Luke 8:15, John 15:5, Romans 7:4, Ephesians 2:10, Colossians 1:6, 2 Timothy 3:16, Titus 2:14, Hebrews 13:16

Topics: "Faith And Works", "Spiritual Fruitfulness"

Description

The preacher delves into the concept of bearing fruit, emphasizing that believers are called to bring forth good works as evidence of their faith. Using various Bible verses, the sermon highlights the importance of continually bearing fruit in every aspect of life, reflecting a genuine transformation and obedience to God's Word. The preacher explores the significance of being like a fruit tree, not conscious of the bearing process but yielding to God's Spirit to produce good works. The sermon also touches on the relationship between faith and good works, stressing that true saving faith always results in a changed life and good deeds. Ultimately, believers are encouraged to abound in every good work, increasing in the knowledge of God and allowing their lives to be a testimony that glorifies Him.

Transcript

"Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach" (Neh. 2:17, KJV).

In the year 586 B.C., Jerusalem had been laid in ruins by Nebuchadnezzar--her people exiled, her temple destroyed, her walls broken, and her gates burned with fire. Although 142 years had passed, Jerusalem was still lying in waste. Sin had stripped Zion of her former glory, and she was exposed to the cry of all who passed by, "Is this the city that men call . . . The joy of the whole earth?" (Lam. 2:15).

Nehemiah belonged to one of the Jewish families that had remained in exile, and it was not until the visit of Hanani that he learned of the true state of his own country (Neh. 1:2-3). In answer to prayer, he was granted leave from his duties as the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, and hurrying to Jerusalem, he surveyed the mournful sight and addressed the words of our text to his fellow countrymen.

We may see in his words, in the first place, a picture of the condition into which the Church sometimes falls: "Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire" (Neh. 2:17). The walls of the city were breached so that anyone could trample in and out. Her fortifications were a heap of rubble, and as a

result, she was at the mercy of the foreigners around her. Her gates, the place where her rulers should have sat and exercised government, were burned to the ground. Her independence, authority, and power were gone. She was the picture of weakness, disorder, and confusion. Similarly, when God's people depart from His Word, it is certain that they will sooner or later be brought low and humiliated in the eyes of the world.

There was a great difference, however, between the manner in which Nehemiah viewed this situation and the attitude of the majority of the Jewish people. The latter recognized their circumstances as an affliction, but it discouraged and paralyzed them. They were as dispirited as they were inactive. They could see no remedy, and they had concluded (as their fathers had done a century before--Hag. 1:2) that the time was not ripe for action. The feeble-hearted language of Judah expressed the common feeling, "The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish, so that we are not able to build the wall" (Neh. 4:10). Their attitude was one of the primary reasons why a hundred years had passed since the first group of Israelites had returned from exile, and yet Jerusalem was still full of rubbish!

But why was it that, viewing the same scene and surrounded by the same circumstances, Nehemiah's attitude was so different? It was because his heart was not hardened. It is terribly easy for us to become so familiar with the effects of sin that we are no longer startled, no longer grieved, no longer distressed. Jerusalem had been in a low state for so long that even the believing Jews had become accustomed to it. Month after month and year after year, they had seen the shattered walls and the gates lying in ashes, and had become so used to the sight that they were no longer affected by it.

You might think that with the very bricks and rubble bearing constant witness, it would be unnecessary for Nehemiah to say, "Ye see the distress that we are in" (Neh. 2:17). Surely the fact was obvious. But the whole trouble was that they did not see it, or they would have done something about it. They were hardened, but Nehemiah was suddenly returning from a far country and was brokenhearted at the sight that met his eyes.

Does this not explain why we can be so insensitive to the real state of the church today? We have become so used to the spiritual ruin that surrounds us that our minds are no longer appalled nor our hearts rent as they ought to be. As Charles Spurgeon said, "We should hear praying of a mighty sort if believers sympathized with men in their ruin," but too often, like Nehemiah's countrymen, we are not conscious of the ruin. We have become so familiar with the prevailing conditions--the empty pews, the famine in the land, and the rubbish in the church--that we are almost deaf to God's call, "Turn ye even to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 2:12). Oh, how unaware we can be of our own hardness of heart! May God enable us to see the distress we are in.

Nehemiah also viewed Jerusalem in a different way than his contemporaries because of his love for the church of God. It was not the condition of bricks and mortar that distressed him, for he could have gazed without tears at the ruins of Samaria or Babylon. However, Nehemiah loved Jerusalem because it was "the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High" (Ps. 46:4). It was love that had made him pray "day and night, for the children of Israel Thy servants" (Neh. 1:6), persevering four months in praying until even Artaxerxes himself became conscious of his cupbearer's burden and inquired, "Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick?" (2:2).

It was the language of love when Nehemiah replied, "Why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?" (Neh.

2:3). Love for God's cause was the mainspring of Nehemiah's actions. It was love that made him leave his personal comfort in the palace of Shushan and cross hundreds of miles of desert to call passionately for his brethren in Jerusalem to arise and build.

The fact that the Jews could bear the sight of fallen Jerusalem was a sure sign that their love had grown cold. So it is with us. If we loved Christ more, we would not find it so difficult to persevere in prayer. If we loved the church as we should, we would pray day and night for a restoration of her glory.

Our prayers would not be in vain because God has not only commanded, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Ps. 122:6a); He has also promised, "They shall prosper that love Thee" (vs. 6b). We pray little because we love little. It was because his heart was sick with love that Samuel Rutherford wrote: "A bed watered with tears, a throat dry with praying, and eyes as a fountain of tears for the sins of the land are rarely to be found among us." Oh, for a revived love to Christ!

Nehemiah's reaction to the state of Jerusalem was also different because he understood the situation. Whereas his fellow countrymen regarded the state of the city as a sad providence, Nehemiah knew it was the judgment of a holy God punishing the sin of His disobedient people. In fact, the purpose of his solitary night journey around the walls and gates may have been to deepen his awareness of this truth (Neh. 2:13-15). As he walked and meditated in the undisturbed solitude of the night, the broken ruins upon which he gazed spoke to him of the sin of the church and of the character of the Holy One of Israel. They spoke of the power and wrath of God. They were solemn confirmations of the warnings that the Lord had given by His prophets two centuries before.

Just as God took Ezekiel and caused him to go around the valley of dry bones and view them on every side (Ezek. 37:2), so He led Nehemiah around Jerusalem that night. Let this be a reminder to us that it is much more than a superficial glance and cursory look that is needed if we are to understand our spiritual condition today. May God lay a deep impression of the cause of our ills upon all our hearts!

In the second place, while our text gives us a picture of the terrible condition into which the church may fall, it also teaches us that it is a condition in which the church need not remain. "Come," says Nehemiah, "and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach" (Neh. 2:17).

Such words must have sounded strange to his brethren. They contained a truth that had been long forgotten--that they need not remain in a condition of reproach. The idea that they could do something about the state of Jerusalem was not at all in keeping with the way of thinking to which they had become accustomed. If they had been asked, "Why are you not building these walls? Why are you in this state?" the answer would have been "We are too weak, there are too many enemies, and there is too much rubbish. One day when Sanballat is dead and Tobiah is gone, we will build again. We must wait until we are stronger and the times are brighter."

However, they spoke this way simply because they did not realize the true cause of their condition. The explanation of the state of Jerusalem was not their enemies nor their surroundings but themselves. When Nehemiah called them to action, he did so because he recognized that it was sin within the church that had laid her waste and that only sin was keeping her low. The sins that they had forgotten, but that God had not forgiven, were the cause of Israel's fallen state.

The church needs reminding of this as much as Israel did in Nehemiah's day. The absence of spiritual prosperity in the church at the present time cannot be attributed to our evil age or to our circumstances but

only to our sin. The responsibility for our degeneracy lies solely upon ourselves. If we are faithful to God, nothing will hinder Him from proving again that He is ready to "open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Mal. 3:10).

We should never entertain for a moment the thought that our condition may be partly the result of an absence of willingness on God's part to bless us. However, God will not bless a disobedient people whose sins have not been put away by confession and sincere repentance. This is precisely what Nehemiah had acknowledged day and night before God: "Both I and my father's house have sinned" (Neh. 1:6). But he also believed God would renew His mercies to them "if ye turn unto Me, and keep My commandments" (vs. 9). If there was renewed obedience, there would be renewed prosperity.

In all our praying for revival, let us take care that we never cast the slightest doubt on the infinite willingness of God to prosper His people. He is always more willing to bless us than we are to be blessed. "Turn ye unto Me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto you" (Zech. 1:3). "Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you" (James 4:8). Today, instead of crying, "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord" (Isa. 51:9), we ought to listen to the cry from heaven which says, "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion . . . Shake thyself from the dust" (Isa. 52:1-2).

Finally, we need to notice something of the consequences that followed the resolution of Nehemiah and the people to arise and build. There was immediate opposition. "When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?" (Neh. 2:19).

Times of reformation and revival are always times of uproar. Samuel Rutherford had good reason to say, "I love a rumbling and raging Devil rather than a subtle or sleeping Devil." It is only when the church is weak and fallen that the devil can sleep. Similarly, Charles Spurgeon observed, "I have taken it as a certain sign that I am doing little good when the Devil is quiet."

The only thing that can enable believers to stand against such opposition is an assurance and certainty that their cause is of God. However, such assurance is another consequence of renewed obedience. Nehemiah boldly replied to the kings who opposed him, "The God of heaven, He will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build" (Neh. 2:20).

It was with such a spirit of certainty that Martin Luther was able to defy almost the whole of Europe, and in such a spirit of confidence that Christian martyrs laid down their lives at the stake and on the scaffold. "Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God," cried a Scottish martyr as he neared his death, and the same mighty assurance swept through the villages and towns of England in the great Methodist awakening of the eighteenth century. Times of deadness are always times of doubt. Disobedience and uncertainty must go together. But let us rise up in new obedience and once more the words will be heard in our own generation, "The God of heaven, he will prosper us."

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