

The First Movement

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of seeing what God has ever meant, has ever intended, and being exercised in the heart to say, 'Something must be done about it, we must get to work, by the help of God we must change this situation'.

Scripture: Nehemiah 2:12, Nehemiah 6:3, Daniel 9:1, Malachi 3:16, Philippians 3:8

Topics: "God's Work", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of Nehemiah's mission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, illustrating three essential elements for a full Christian life: recognizing God's worthy work, cooperating with Him, and understanding the inherent conflict and cost involved. He highlights Nehemiah's deep concern for God's people and the spiritual decline they faced, urging believers to engage in prayerful travail and action to fulfill God's purposes. Sparks draws parallels between Nehemiah's time and the present, calling for a commitment to God's work despite challenges, and encouraging a vision that leads to constructive action rather than mere criticism.

Transcript

"And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (Nehemiah 6:3).

"And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God put into my heart to do for Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 2:12).

These two fragments - "I am doing a great work", "what my God put into my heart to do" - give us the entrance into the great matter which is historically set forth in the book of Nehemiah.

Three Things Essential to a Fullness of the Christian Life

There are three things which are essential to an adequate life with God, to a fullness of the Christian life.

Firstly, the realization that God is concerned with the accomplishment of something worthy of Himself. We shall not get very far toward a full Christian life, or a life with God, until it breaks upon us and takes hold of us that God is really concerned with the accomplishment of something worthy of Himself.

The second thing is that people shall become aware of what that great something in the heart of God is, what it is that God is so concerned with, and then that they shall be moved to co-operate with Him in it. That is an essential to a life of fullness with God, that we His people shall come to see what it is that He is really set upon, what it is that will really be worthy of Himself, and, more than that, that we shall become so deeply moved about this matter as to co-operate with Him in it.

And then, in the third place, that we recognize that this object in the heart of God and this co-operation with Him by His people involves very real conflict and cost, and that His people must face that and be ready to accept it.

These three things comprise the elements and features of a full life with God, and not one of them can be lacking. The very conflict and cost will themselves be the evidences of the value of the thing into which the people of God have been brought, and the thing which is so dear to God's heart. Where there is no conflict and no cost, there may be reason to feel that the outcome is not worth while. I think that the view of the Apostles, at any rate, was that the conflict was the complement of the calling so great and so high.

So that here in this book of Nehemiah we have those three things brought before us in a very full and a very powerful way. They are: a great Cost, a great Work, and a great Conflict.

The book of Nehemiah, as you will know, and indeed Nehemiah himself, is a great historic illustration of a much greater spiritual reality. What we have here on the earth in literal history is but a reflection of what is going on in this dispensation in the spiritual realm, and what in this dispensation is so much greater than anything that ever was in days gone past on this earth.

Now we have these three features here. They are: the wall or its rebuilding - that is the object, that is the purpose, that is the thing in view. Then we have the work of rebuilding, and the workers; and then we have, going hand-in-hand with the purpose and the work, the warfare. The Wall, the Work, the Warfare; or; in other words, the Calling, the Conduct and the Conflict. These comprise what we can now call, in present-day or present-time language, the recovery and completing of the Lord's testimony, for that is really what is before us at this time. And so we may set over this whole matter, this little fragment: "a great work" - "I am doing a great work"; and it is with this great work that we shall be occupied, as the Lord leads us.

God's Reaction in a Day of Spiritual Declension

Nehemiah is the last great character of the Old Testament and his book the last historic book of the Old Testament. Those who do not study the chronological arrangement of the Old Testament books may not be altogether alive to these facts. Because the book of Nehemiah comes in our Bibles so much before the end of the Old Testament, it is taken by many to relate chronologically to a very much earlier period; but it really ought to be alongside of the prophecies of Malachi. When we come to Nehemiah we are contemporary with the prophet Malachi.

Haggai and Zechariah uttered their prophecies and passed on. Zerubbabel the governor, and Joshua the high priest, had accomplished their ministry. Ezra had fulfilled his part of the work, as the prophets mentioned had inspired the people to finish the rebuilding of the Temple. And then there set in a course of spiritual decline. Great things had taken place under Haggai, Zerubbabel, Joshua, Zechariah: but that glory faded; that promise seemed to be short-lived. We come to Malachi - and you know the content of Malachi's prophecies. Indeed, a 'radiant morn had passed away'; indeed things had become overclouded;

deep shadows of spiritual declension filled the sky over Jerusalem; and all those sad, yes, terrible things mentioned by Malachi are found, after all, amongst the people of God: so that only within the remnant that had returned from the captivity was there found a remnant of the remnant - "they that feared the Lord" (Mal. 3:16) - and it was into those conditions, in the midst of such a state, that Nehemiah came to fulfil his ministry.

This man came to Jerusalem and set about the undertaking which is indicated at the beginning of the book which bears his name - the rebuilding of the wall. I think that that carries with it a wonderful, yes, inspiring significance: that in a day, such as that day in which Malachi prophesied and uttered his terrible words from the Lord, the Lord has not abandoned - the Lord acts again; and this rebuilding of the wall is God's action in a day of spiritual declension. It almost shouts to us that God, after all, and in the worst times, is still committed to the recovery and completion of His testimony. It is most impressive that the book of Nehemiah - the last historic book of the Old Testament, with Nehemiah the last great man of the Old Testament - is marked, in a day of terrible spiritual decline, by God acting again in relation to His testimony. Sometimes we are tempted to feel that the time has gone and conditions are too bad, and we can hope for nothing very much in view of the situation; but this book and this man administer a very sound rebuke to any such pessimism.

Travail in Prayer

Now, before we take up the three main features of the Wall, the Work and the Warfare, we must begin with an essential factor which is embodied in Nehemiah himself. We have to go back a little, because the beginning of this thing was many years before, more than seventy years before, and it began in the heart of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a man with a broken heart, a man of a sorrowful spirit - a man whose heart was broken and whose spirit was sorrowful because of the conditions amongst the Lord's people; and Jeremiah in that travail fulfilled his ministry, and gave utterance to a declaration, a prophecy, that the people would go into captivity for seventy years. That, as we know, came to pass; and then, as the seventy years were expiring, another man right in the heart of the situation in Babylon took up Jeremiah's travail. Jeremiah fulfilled his ministry of travail: Daniel took up the travail in prayer. Daniel tells us (chapter 9) that he came to know, "by the books", that the captivity was to be for seventy years; and now he sees that the seventy years are coming to an end, and so he gives himself to intense prayer. Note: a ministry of travail by Jeremiah, an enlightened intercessory travail by Daniel - or he has become aware of the time in which he lives. He has come to realize by the books that the time is fulfilled, and so he takes up the travail in this tremendous prayer in the ninth chapter of the book of Daniel.

God's Sovereign Reaction

Now we have the next move. Because the time has come and God is on the move again for the recovery of His testimony, He sovereignly stirs up the spirit of Cyrus, who makes a decree, and the remnant return to Jerusalem. The last two verses of the second book of the Chronicles, as you know, state the fact, and then the very first verses of the book of Ezra following repeat the words exactly. "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia", and Ezra was one of the fruits of that sovereign movement of God. When Ezra fulfilled his part of the ministry, we come to Nehemiah, and we find again the taking up of that essential factor which has led to this co-operation with God.

In the first chapter of Nehemiah and into the second chapter, we find Nehemiah gripped, deeply and terribly gripped, by this travail - this travail which commenced with Jeremiah, this travail which was born in

the heart of Daniel away in Babylon. Here it is in Nehemiah - travail which is an echo of the very heart of God concerning His people. We have to fit a great deal of prophetic utterance into this situation, to hear the cry of those prophets, all of them, as they express God's mind and God's heart about the state of His people. Now that cry - shall we say, that sob - in the heart of God is born into this man; it finds its culmination, so far as the Old Testament is concerned, in the heart of Nehemiah.

Note, before we go further, these two factors, these two main aspects. Firstly, God acting sovereignly. That is where the movement begins. God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus and you have all that wonderful movement of sovereignty as recorded in the book of Ezra. Those of you who are familiar with that book will recall at once the marvellous facilities which God brought about through the Persian ruler for the rebuilding of the temple: every provision made, everything seen to that the thing should be done; God acting sovereignly. That is one side.

Man Suffering in Fellowship With God

But here in Nehemiah you have the other side - man in suffering fellowship with God. Ezra is the sovereignty of God; Nehemiah is the fellowship with God by man. Ezra is God acting directly and independently; Nehemiah is man acting with God, or God acting through man. Those two things always go together - remember that. We must never think, because God is sovereign and His purposes are fixed and settled and He can do as He will, act independently, He is self-sufficient, that He will in fact act like that. He never has done so. Since the creation He has always brought men into fellowship with Himself in His sovereign purposes - into deep fellowship and travailing fellowship. So however great may be the need, whatever may be the demand, the call, the tragedy, which makes it necessary for God to act sovereignly in the first place, He is not going to do it until He can find an instrument which shares His heart feeling, carries His heart burden, enters into heart co-operation with Him.

Nehemiah was such a one. So far as the practical side was concerned, in this final movement of God in that dispensation, everything had its beginning in the heart of Nehemiah. That man's heart is revealed in the very first chapter of this book. It is therefore very necessary for purposes of today - for I am not stopping now to try to make a parallel between our time and the time of Nehemiah: that I take it is patent and obvious to anyone with spiritual perception - but if God is going to do something today with regard to the recovery and completion of His testimony, which needs recovering and needs completing, He will have to have the counterpart of Nehemiah - a vessel with a great concern, the very concern of God Himself, born in its heart.

For a few minutes, then, let us look at Nehemiah's concern.

Nehemiah's Concern

This man had a true appreciation both of how things ought to be and of how they actually were. We will never get anywhere as instrumental in the purpose of God until those two things are clear in our hearts - how things actually are, and then how things ought to be, how God would have things if He had them according to His mind, His heart, what things would be like if they did reflect and express the purpose of God. You and I will never get very far, if we get anywhere at all, in our relationship with God, until we are seeing something of the real state of things in contrast with the mind of God - until we have seen really what God wants, what God really has His heart set upon, exactly how things would be if they were according to His will.

Then, of course, we must see the contrasts, the conflicting factors, the nature of the situation as it is not according to God's mind. Nehemiah was such a man. He looked, he formed his judgment upon the data: he saw - on the one hand, what God would have; on the other hand, how different things were from what God would have. There are, of course, many people who can be very critical of Christianity, very critical of the Church, who have quite a lot of mental appraisal and judgment of the situation, who in a very superior way talk down about the bad conditions which exist among Christians and in the Church, and who can give themselves quite cheaply to deploring the state of things.

Nehemiah was not of that kind. Nehemiah was not just negative; Nehemiah was positive, he was constructive. He was not only the one who could say, 'Now, look at the situation - look how different it is from what God intended and what God willed - see this and see that and see the other thing'. Not only was he able to do that, but he was able to bring forth a positive remedy and to show how the thing could be changed to provide a way for recovery. He was a man of positive vision. There are so many people who take a negative line, and when you ask them what ought to be done, what is the thing we must do about it, they have nothing to bring forward. It is all negative - and very plentiful, at that! - but there is nothing to present or provide. Nehemiah was not that kind of man. He was fully acquainted with the situation; he knew just how deplorable it was. You notice several times he speaks of it, but he had the remedy. He was a positive man and a man of action, because he was a man of vision. He was not just 'visionary', in the negative sense: he was a man of action in relation to what he saw.

And that, dear friends, does present us with a challenge I have no doubt but that most of us could point the finger at things which are not according to God's mind amongst His people, in His Church; could point out how different things are from what we can see they ought to be - how bad this is and how bad that is. Oh, that is easy and that is very cheap - to criticize and to listen to criticism and to agree with it, to take it in, and to nurse the complaints, to keep them alive. But it is another thing altogether to be able to come forward and say, 'Look here, this is not good, this is not as the Lord would have it, and this is what we ought to do. This is the thing that the Lord would have done, this is the thing to which we must give ourselves, to change this situation'. I venture to say that we have no right to criticize and judge and condemn if we have not got a remedy, if we have not got something positive to put in the place of what we see. So let us be quiet if we cannot provide something better, but the Lord save us from having to be quiet just because we are negative, and make us active because we have got vision.

I ask you: How true is this in your own case? What vision have you? Do you see what the Lord has ever meant, has ever intended? - what really is in His heart, what He would have, and how He would have things? Do you see just exactly how things would be if the Lord had His way and reached His end? Do you? Are you able to see how different things are from what the Lord would have, and then are you so exercised in your heart, as were these men and as was this man, that you say, 'Something must be done about it, we must get to work, by the help of God we must change this situation' - believing that it is God's will that it should be so? Are you of that kind? Well, that is the appeal of this book.

The Features of Nehemiah's Travail

Let us spend a little while in looking still more inwardly into this travail of Nehemiah's. What were the features of his travail? I have been trying to understand him, to read him, to get into his heart, to get behind his cry, behind his sorrow, his burden in his distress. As I have done so, it has seemed that these are some of the things which lay behind this travail of his.

Nehemiah saw how things ought to be, and how things really were; and then he saw his own position. There he was, away there in Shushan the palace, cupbearer to the king. He was an exile, and he was virtually a slave, one who had been taken on as a servant in the palace. From the standpoint of that palace, and from the standpoint of Babylon, it may have been an honourable position; but from his own standpoint he was like a slave in the world: he was spending his time in the world, the business of this world, and his whole soul was groaning. 'Here am I in the business of this world, having to go to work every morning and finishing late at night, and this is repeated day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year - and my soul cries out to be doing something about the purpose of God and the situation of the Lord's people'. This cry against his own position was a feature of his travail.

God is sovereign even in that. Perhaps that touches you who are reading these lines. You are going to work every morning and coming home every evening, and by far the greater amount of your time and strength is occupied with serving this world. You feel like a slave to this world, and you say, 'Oh, that I might be free to do something for God!' My dear friend, there is value in travail like that. There were many in Babylon who had settled down and accepted the situation, who were taking up business and earning wages, and were making this now their life. They saw nothing more than that, or other than that. But not so Nehemiah. His soul revolted against his position in the world. 'Oh, to be free to do something for God!' That travail meant something to God. That travail was the birth pangs of something for God.

If you are not knowing something of that - the drudgery of the home-life, perhaps you might call it 'the trivial round, the common task', the going to work by morning and coming home by evening - and there is at the same time in your soul no cry for the interests of God, you are a tragedy indeed. But it may be that all the time, in and through it, you are longing to be able to do more for the Lord. Let me say that that is the kind of travail that is going to be fruitful. It is going to be fruitful in some way or other. It will out - it will out in some way or other. Something will come of that. I am not going to say that the day will come when you will be released from your worldly occupation and set free for what you call 'full-time service'. I think it is a very real mistake to talk about the service of God in that way, for you may in your own travail be serving God in a potential way where you are. There may be tremendous potentialities in this travail in your heart as you go about your daily work, all the time more concerned for the Lord's interests than for this world.

I think it must have been like that with Nehemiah. 'Here I am, the king's cupbearer!' You can almost hear the revolt in his heart. How little he thought of this - because how much more the Lord's interests had become to him! That man, that ruler, that king, was a great man, the greatest man in the world at that time. It was no small thing to be his cupbearer, and to be in the palace of Shushan, the same place where Esther and Mordecai were. You know all about them from the book of Esther, and all that was represented there. Yet when Nehemiah came to the point of answering the king's question as to why he was sad of countenance, his prayer to the Lord was not couched in language of great respect and honour for the king. "Prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man" (Neh. 1:11). A great king - 'this man'!

Oh, this was all so mean compared with the Lord and His interest! He could not accept this, he was in travail. You see, the greatest honours that this world can give, the highest position that we may occupy here, are just nothing to men and women who have seen what the Lord is after. All honours, all degrees, all positions, are as nothing when once you have seen the on-high calling. 'I count them as very refuse', said Paul (Phil. 3:8), 'these things of honour and glory in this world'. He had seen the Lord and the heavenly calling. Nehemiah's position was, I am sure, one great factor in his travail.

And then there was the long delay. 'Oh, the time is so long! Oh, that we could do something!' The Lord is demanding such patience; we kick against the delays of the Lord. We are so deeply tested by deferred opportunities. Is it not true? Nothing opening up; no way. But the point is - are we really in travail about this thing? I am sure that the Lord uses delays and deferments in order to test us as to our real concern. Some people have not to be put off very much before they give up altogether. Some people can have only a little discouragement, a little trial of patience, and they say, 'Well, it is not worth it', and they quit. Here is a man who went on all these years in deep trial of patience, tested by the long-delayed opportunity to do something; but he held on to the end, and the fact is that he was most vigorous after all in his quest for the Lord's interests.

How is this long delay, deferred opportunity, affecting you? Is this purpose of God so deep in you that it is stronger than all other deferred hopes, disappointed expectations? This man's soul was starved - his soul was starved. I mean by that he was always anxious and eager to do something; in doing something he would have found his real gratification and satisfaction and pleasure. His soul would have gone out at liberty to do things, but he was starved in his soul and brought more and more to the place where, if ever anything was going to be done at all, it would be God who did it - 'I will never be able to do this'. That is a great place to come to. 'God has to open this door, God has to provide this opportunity, God has to see that this thing is done. I can do nothing, I am helpless!' But that soul starvation, what it costs us! If only we could do something, how much easier it would be, or if we could do more, how much more satisfaction we would have! But that is a part of our preparation. Indeed, it is out of that that real spiritual values come.

Nehemiah had the report from his brethren who came back as to the state of things in Jerusalem. The walls were broken down, the gates were burned with fire, and the people were in a deplorable position. He had the report, he knew all about the need, but he was totally unable to do anything. Only God could do it. Do believe, dear friends, that that is a position which gives great promise. That is a position to which God works. Those who are going to be most used of the Lord and most fruitful in fellowship with the Lord will come to the place, not once nor twice, but again and again, where they know they can do nothing; only the Lord can do it. But their soul is in travail over the whole thing. It is not a matter of throwing up the hands and sitting back and saying, 'I can do nothing, therefore I do not care'. That is not Nehemiah, not at all. He turned his travail into prayer; and you know when travail becomes prayer and prayer is travail, things are very real, things are very pure - because that kind of prayer and travail deals with all the self elements.

How often there are elements of ambition in our wanting to do something, that we should come into the work, that we should come into the picture, that we should come into the satisfaction of doing something, that we should be in some position; and when the Lord deals with us like this and the whole agony turns to prayer, in that prayer all these self elements are dealt with very thoroughly and go out. The very fact that it is travelling prayer when nothing else can be done proves that there is no self in this. Our praying is travail. It is not asking for something for ourselves - it is agony for what is of God.

Presently Nehemiah will be charged with having personal interests. His enemies will say that he is wanting to set himself up as the king, and he is appointing prophets to preach him. What a subtle assault of the devil to bring an accusation upon the man to undo him! If it were true, how he would be undone by that assault of the devil! If the devil ever has real ground to say, 'After all, it is Number One that is governing this whole thing: it is your own ambition, it is yourself!' - if he has ground for saying that, we may well be floored and undone. But it had to be so with Nehemiah that such accusations had no ground. He was able to say: 'You feigned this out of your own mind' (Neh. 6:8). 'This is not true. God has dealt with me in the depths. He has sifted my soul of all such interests for myself'. The ground had to be undercut from the

enemy so that he had nothing personal upon which to work.

Now, Nehemiah's countenance was sad before the king, and the king noted it. But his countenance did not speak of self-pity or of personal frustration. It spoke of grief concerning spiritual conditions.

The Lord knows how things are at the present time. The Lord sees how different they are from what He intended. He knows all about this. He must bring some people to see as He sees, and feel as He feels, and commit themselves to that which He shows them, at any cost. This introductory word is the challenge. We cannot go on with the work or the warfare until we are like this, really like this - people after the kind of Nehemiah. The Lord make us that.

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