

The State of the Wall

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the need for courageous action and clear definition in restoring the spiritual testimony represented by the wall of Jerusalem.

Scripture: Nehemiah 1:2, Nehemiah 2:12

Topics: "Spiritual Restoration", "Leadership in Action"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes Nehemiah's proactive approach to addressing the broken state of Jerusalem's wall, highlighting the importance of firsthand knowledge and personal conviction in recognizing spiritual decay. Nehemiah's courage and determination to repair the wall serve as a model for believers today, urging them to not only identify issues within the Church but also to take action and inspire others to join in the restoration efforts. Sparks draws parallels between Nehemiah's leadership and the Apostle Paul's, stressing the need for a clear definition of what constitutes the testimony of Christ amidst confusion and compromise. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a collective response to rebuild and restore the spiritual integrity of the Church, reflecting God's will and purpose.

Transcript

Nehemiah's Action

Now from Nehemiah's concern we move on to his action - for, as we have said, Nehemiah was no detached, negative critic of the situation. He was not just one who was pointing out all that was wrong, without knowing what ought to be done for the glory of God, and doing something about it. So he took action, and if there is one book in the Bible, or at any rate in the Old Testament, which is characterized by action more than another, I think this book is such.

When Nehemiah took action, he first of all fully and accurately acquainted himself with the situation. We have such words as these: "Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men out of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, that were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 1:2).

And then when he came to Jerusalem, we see him moving, in these descriptive words: "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; neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon. And I went out by night... and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with

fire" (Nehemiah 2:12,13).

So Nehemiah took pains to get to know exactly what the situation was. It is true that he had information. Report came to him, or he made it his business to get to know from those who had first-hand knowledge, as to what the situation was, but as soon as it was possible for him to do so on the spot, he verified the report and accurately informed himself at first-hand exactly how matters stood. And I would suggest that, in like manner, when the Lord is speaking concerning the recovery of His testimony which is the matter before us, those who are going to co-operate with Him must be accurately and fully informed. While their information may come indirectly, they must not be content with the best second-hand report, they must know at first-hand exactly how things are. You and I will never be of much use to the Lord until we know exactly what the spiritual state of things is and what needs to be done. We must really see and know this for ourselves, not just get it from the many people there are who tell us about it.

It is a fact that we can hardly go anywhere today in any part of the world, without finding people deploring the spiritual state of things amongst the Lord's people. Their sense of things is in the main a right one - although, as we said earlier, many of them just complain and murmur and grumble and criticize without having anything to offer in the way of remedy and improvement. Nevertheless, their registration of the spiritual state of the Church is very largely true. It is very widely true, today, that everything is not right with the Church; things are not as they should be, as the Lord would have them. But we cannot go on a general - even though it be a very general - feeling that things are not right. This must come into our own being; we must know it for ourselves. I am not suggesting that we should go and try to find out all that is wrong and make a long list of all that is so defective and deplorable today; but I am saying this - that if we are to co-operate with God in getting things as He would have them, the matter must be a first-hand one in our own hearts. We must know it for ourselves. We must not just be professional grumblers, but those who have real travail of heart because of what we know to be the case, because of what we see, what is clear to our own eyes and what troubles our own hearts.

So Nehemiah did, in the first place, inform himself directly as to the situation. And it was a situation calculated to take the heart out of anyone. It really could have been so disconcerting that Nehemiah would not have gone on any further with it, but returned to Babylon and said: 'We must make the best of a bad job. Things are not as they ought to be, they are quite hopeless. It is no use trying to do anything about it.' But he did not give it up as a hopeless situation, bad as it was. I am quite sure that if you had been one of the men going round with Nehemiah that night, you might well have said: 'This is something altogether beyond our handling; we will never be able to make anything of this. This is hopeless.' Nehemiah was not like that. I think Nehemiah was one of the most courageous men of the Old Testament - a true hero: faced with a terrible situation, but facing it with confidence in God, because he knew, not only that this was a bad situation, but that God was on the move to put it right, to make something different of it. It was God's will that it should be otherwise; and if God wills a thing, then we have a ground of confidence, however impossible it may seem to us. So he did not give it up, but faced it - faced it squarely.

I have a very great deal in my mind that will not find expression in these messages, but I have been taking in the whole compass of the Bible in connection with this, and I am especially moving in the New Testament, as you will see as we go on. I am thinking of the Apostle Paul, the great Nehemiah of this dispensation. What a situation he had to face amongst Christians! What a condition of things he had to meet and deal with! We feel, as we read his first letter to the Corinthians, that we would have given it up and said: 'This is a hopeless mess - is this Christianity at all?' But see how Paul heroically and courageously faced that situation. He did not give it up.

Today, we might be greatly discouraged, we might easily feel that it is not possible to have a full, clear testimony that glorifies God, seeing how the Church is destroyed, how "the wall... is broken down", how "the gates are burned with fire" - that is, how the whole testimony is rent, and torn, and in ruins, as we might say. Yes, the situation is a disconcerting one and we have to face this question: Does God want it to be otherwise? Does God mean it to be otherwise? Is it the will of God that it shall be otherwise? Has God given it up? Is He desiring and intending - nay more, is He moving to secure a different state of things? If there is anything to prove that God is actively concerned about this matter, then we dare not abandon it. But it takes a great deal of courage, all the courage that God can give us, to face the present situation. Those who know it know that I am not exaggerating.

The Vision and Inspiration of Nehemiah

And then, once more, in his action Nehemiah brought others into his vision and into his concern. First of all, it was in his own heart and it was hidden in his heart. He said nothing to anyone of what God had put on his heart. It was something between himself and the Lord, in the first place, and it was not until he had reached a certain position, and made a certain decision consequent upon his investigation, that he opened his heart to others. I think that is a splendid thing, a thing of which to take note. It is so easy to have ideas and then to begin to broadcast your ideas and unload them on to other people. It is quite another thing, between yourself and God, to have got to grips with the situation and become fully impressed with the greatness of it, and then to resolve that this thing must be done and to bring others into your vision and inspiration.

You see, Nehemiah was made to be a tremendous inspiration. You read through this book and see what you might almost call the magnetism of this man's personality, the inspiration that he was. People leapt to the impossible under the inspiration and vision of this man. There were times when they were very low in despondency, but then he pulled them out of their slough. What a force he was as a true leader to bring others into his vision! And do you not feel strongly that that is the real need today - of people who have vision, who have weighed up everything, who have faced the whole issue, and then who have such confidence in God, with the assurance that God wants and means something different, that they have come out with their positive impact upon others, so that others come into line? That truly is a great need. It is the easiest thing in the world to be a passenger, always to be carried. Ah, it is so easy to be a parasite, just living on and draining others. But it is quite another thing to be an inspiration, to be one who really does help others into the thing that God is after, to be an inspiration to them to come along to help in the work of the Lord. Nehemiah was that; and I put it to you that if we have any sense of things being other than according to God's mind, and that God would have them otherwise, we ought to be positive people in this matter, and be an inspiration to others about it.

And so Nehemiah, having taken the full measure of it, and having weighed it all up, and having impressed himself with the greatness of the task in hand, without despairing, turned to it and so inspired the other men to whom he opened his heart that they said: "Let us rise up and build". Oh, for a people like that! A people today who know all about it, and, seeing how things are, will say: 'Let us do something about it - let us rise up and build!'

Well, that is the beginning of his action, and you will agree that that is action indeed. Of course, we are not just looking at this as a human matter, because none of us can be like this for very long, at any rate not unless we are energized by the Spirit of God. Consider the Apostle Paul again, who knew all about it, all about the conditions, and knew how discouraged and despondent the people of God could be about the

situation. His prayer was this: "that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory... that ye may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man" (Eph. 3:16); "that ye may be... strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory, unto all patience and long-suffering with joy" (Col. 1:9,11). The mighty energies of the Spirit of God inwardly are the only energies by which we shall be able to go on. We must allow a large place for the inward working of God in the life of Nehemiah, because we know full well that only so can we do anything about this situation.

The Object - The Wall

Now let us come to the main features of the whole matter of this book. We said, in our first study, that they are three: namely, the Wall, the Work and the Warfare, or the Object, the Conduct and the Conflict. We begin with the object, the Wall, and we must be very clear as to what is represented by this wall that Nehemiah was going to repair - what the wall stands for. May I say three preliminary things about the wall, as to what the wall really was and what it is now.

First of all, the wall was a definition: that is, it defined. A definition: that means, spiritually interpreted - interpreted in our own time, according to Divine thoughts - a clear defining of what is Christ and what is not Christ. That wall of Jerusalem defined a certain area, a certain territory; and it stood there originally to say: 'Now, what is within this wall, this mark, is of a certain order, of a certain character; within this, things are so and so.' Of course, the character was given by the temple. right there at the centre, so to speak; but the wall was a defining factor, and we need not stay with detail about that. It is only necessary for us to say that in the recovering and completing of the Lord's testimony there is the necessity for clear definition of what is of Christ and what is not. Things have become terribly confused. Here the wall is broken down and there is much rubbish. I am going to deal with the rubbish presently, but here is the fact - much rubbish where the wall had been. Multitudes of people today have no clear discernment, perception or apprehension as to what is Christ and what is merely 'Christianity'. In evangelical Christianity things have become terribly mixed up, and what is necessary, it is evident, is the reconstituting of that which clearly and exactly defines what Christ is; that Christ shall be clearly understood and known and all the confusing and complicating and mixing elements shall be eliminated.

The wall was a defining thing. That means, spiritually, that it stands to represent the real character of Christ. I said a few pages earlier that there is very much behind what I am saying that cannot now find expression. but I have been thinking about walls - looking at walls in general through the Bible and passing from all the historic walls to the great inclusive wall at the end of the book of the Revelation, the wall of the New Jerusalem; and I find amongst other things that a wall is to define the character or nature of what is within. That is true, is it not, of the great wall of the New Jerusalem at the end of the Bible? Its main feature, we may say, is its character: its glory, its beauty, its purity. It is the character of Christ that is the first thing about His testimony, and that has to become established and very clearly defined.

And then - you may think that this is a distinction without a difference, but there is a difference - the wall represented a demarcation, that is, a distinction. Here things are not mixed at all; here at the wall there is a declaration and an establishment of the fact, that this testimony is a distinctive testimony. It is not a general thing; it is not something that brings into itself all sorts of different things. It is clear; it is distinctive. It has one thing to say, and that one thing is: 'Only what is of Christ can pass this, can be within this'.

Now that is very, very searching, and very arresting. We shall find as we go on that this brother of Nehemiah's, Hanani, was eventually made a policeman. And he, as policeman, was in charge of the

gates, to deal with intruders, with merchants - and there are plenty of merchants finding their way into the testimony of Jesus, who have their own interests to serve, their own business to do, and all sorts of merchandise to bring into the confines of God, of Christ. And this wall said. 'No!' You read on to the end of the book, and see how Nehemiah and his policeman dealt with the merchants! They were having none of that - they chased them, they used strong measures with the merchants. But they did not do any more than the Lord Jesus did with the merchants of His day, with His knotted cord. No, the simple word is this: the wall spoke of a distinction between the precious and the vile; and that is covering much ground; it puts very much between what is of the Spirit of God and what is of another spirit.

And in the third place, this wall represented a defence. It was something which was placed as it were in a position of responsibility. It was responsible to protect the Lord's interests and the Lord's people from that which would invade, which would attack, which would corrupt, which would change the character. The Lord needs a testimony which challenges everything, a testimony which will not let anything pass that is not wholly of the Lord. That is where things have gone wrong with the Church, with the people of God, with the Lord's interests. So much has been allowed to creep in, to have a place, that is not of the Lord, and there has not been a sufficiently strong testimony to what is of the Lord to meet it.

Again, in your New Testament you find that at the beginning, when the spiritual wall was first built, it was such a strong, clear thing in the power of the Holy Spirit, that first of all there were many that durst not join themselves - they durst not, they were afraid. The situation was such that fear was created in the heart where things were not right with God. On the other hand, people coming in fell down on their faces and said 'God is in the midst of you'. The Lord needs a testimony like that, does He not? - something so clear, so strong, that those who do not mean business with God are afraid, and in our common expression, just 'clear off'. "They went out... that they might be made manifest that they all are not of us" (I John 2:19), and that is a very healthy sign. Things are in a good condition when that happens. Ah, yes, but when things are in a bad condition you are afraid to lose anybody - you hold on to anybody. The Lord said: 'No; don't try to hold on to everybody, don't try to bring in everybody'. This testimony, this wall, is a defence, a protection against anybody, anything. How necessary it was to Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day! The whole book shows that. You look at these other people, and see what this wall meant to Tobiah and to the rest of the company. They knew the implications of this wall; they knew that they were not getting into this.

Well, that is the meaning of the wall in the first place. But let us go just a little further in the matter. The wall represents Christ on two sides. On the one side, it represents Christ outwardly to the people of the world and the nations. On the other side, it represents what Christ is to the Lord's own people themselves. In a phrase, the wall is a testimony in fullness to the Son of God: what the Son of God means, as seen in this world, to the world and to the people of God.

The Need For Repairing the Wall

It is necessary that I should put in a word here, lest there should be a misapprehension of our meaning. Nehemiah was not building the entire wall all over again from the foundations. If you look closely, you will see that it is the repairing of the wall that is going on, the repairing and making complete of what had been broken down. Why do I say that? Well, it is not given to us, we are not called upon, to build this thing from the foundations. Thank God. the foundation was laid, and thank God, the wall was built, in the beginning. The book of the Acts shows the wall, the testimony, in fullness and completeness, and in glory and strength and grandeur: a mighty defence, a mighty revelation of Christ to the nations and a mighty meaning of Christ to His own people. It was there at the beginning. Nehemiah did not come to commence,

to initiate this thing. He came to a scene where what had once been full, clear, perfect, was broken down, ruined, and his work was to repair it and make it complete again; and that is where we are. If we are called into anything, we are called into that. We are not called upon to do what the Apostles did. They did their work, and it stands; but since their time there has been a good deal that speaks of the conditions of Nehemiah's day - a good deal of collapse, of breakdown, of disintegration and of spoliation; and the Lord calls in to recover, to recover what was. That, surely, is the work to which we are called.

So we look first of all at the wall in brokenness. Here it is: "Then said I unto them, Ye see the evil case 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). The last word touches the spot, does it not? See the great enemy of God, of Christ, of the testimony of our Lord, having it as his one abiding object to bring reproach upon the Name of the Lord - anyhow, by any means, whether by direct assault or by subtle underworking; somehow to bring the Lord's Name and testimony into reproach. "That we be no more a reproach". What a motive to govern the people of God, to save the Lord and His people from the reproach of this broken-down condition!

Idolatry the Cause of the Broken-Down Condition

We must, before we can move to the recovery, examine and trace the fundamental and ultimate reason for this state of things. We are taking our cue from the illustration in this book and in the other books leading up to it. There is one word that goes to the root of the whole matter, and that word is idolatry. If you look at the wall in its ruins, its wreckage; if you meditate and contemplate and ask questions - 'Why? Why this? How is it that this is come about? What are the reasons for this state of things?' - the inclusive and fundamental answer is - idolatry.

Is it not very impressive to recognize that, because of the idolatry in Israel, the nation was sent to the very heart of idolatry to be cured of it? Babylon was the world centre of idolatry - you know that from the great image set up. Now Israel had allowed idolatry in her midst, and the Lord sent her to the world centre of idolatry to be cured of idolatry. I say that it is impressive, and it just means this: that sometimes the Lord's way of curing is to give an overdose of the thing with which we flirt. They hankered and they flirted. The prophets cried, pleaded, wept, appealed, agonized, that the people would break with this thing, cease their flirtations with the gods of the heathen nations round about them: but they would not, they were wedded. 'All right', said the Lord; 'have what you are after - have it to the full' and indeed they had it to the full, and it cured Israel of idolatry in that form for the rest of their history. I am not saying that it cured them of the spirit of idolatry; we shall see that later. But that form of open complicity with the power of evil was destroyed by their being given that upon which their hearts were set.

Here is the extreme instance of the working of a certain law. The Psalmist said about Israel in the wilderness: "And he gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul" (Ps. 106:15). They refused to let go. They would have; they said 'yes' in the face of God's 'no'. 'We will have.' 'All right', said the Lord - and they were the losers in their getting.

Now that principle does work, you know, and I am not so sure that it is not working today. In the Church, in Christianity, the world has found its place. The Church of God went out to the world and brought the world in. There has been complicity with the spirit of this world, it has found a large place in Christianity; and while it is not my desire to speak in this way, we must be very faithful. Perhaps all unperceived, all unrecognized - God grant that it is so - even in evangelical Christianity, there is a good deal of worldly

principle, the bringing in of unspiritual things - names, titles, resources and what not, to do the work of God. There is a hidden complicity to get favour, to get advantage; there is behind all that another spirit - the spirit of idolatry - which is getting a grip upon the Lord's people. Very well: what has happened? The Lord has let the Church have what it wants, and today it is feeling that it has lost its power, lost its position, because the world has too much of a place. In its gaining it has lost: that is very patent, is it not?

That principle works - and mark you, it works personally too, if your heart is so set upon something that you will not take 'no' from the Lord; you insist, you will have it; and your threat to the Lord, even if it is not put in the form of a threat, is that unless the Lord gives you that, or does that for you, you are not going on. If there is anything like that, the Lord will give it to you, He will let you have it. It will be a curse to you. Abraham did that over Ishmael - and what a curse! You see, there is the principle. Now the point is this, that these people allowed idolatry to come into their lives, in spirit and in principle; and the Lord, through His prophet, "rising up early", appealed; but they refused to listen to the voice of the prophet, so the Lord said: 'All right, have what you want - away to Babylon!' They lost everything.

What is idolatry? If it is not bowing down to idols of wood and stone, it takes many, many subtle forms, and very often indirect ways. It is just heart communion with anything that takes God's place, that gets in God's way. What a lot of ground that covers! The ultimate effect is that the Lord is frustrated, the Lord is hindered, the Lord cannot have what He is after. That is idolatry in principle. It displaces the Lord, it makes difficulties for the Lord.

I said earlier that, although Israel was cured of that outer form of idolatry, the principle or spirit of idolatry was not eradicated: for in the days of our Lord they were worshipping tradition - and tradition can be an idol. Yes, tradition can be an idol: you can be so committed and devoted to tradition that the Lord does not have a chance. It obstructs the Lord's way, like the rubbish that Nehemiah could not pass - the beast that he rode could not pass the rubbish. Very often the rubbish in the Lord's way is the rubbish of a dead tradition, of a dead history, something that belongs to the past and is not alive now. That is the principle of idolatry. That was the fundamental and ultimate cause of the brokenness of the wall, the wreckage, the rubbish, the debris: idolatry, heart union and communion with that which is not of the Lord.

Remember that this book of Nehemiah is full of bad conditions, of evils and errors, and these things correspond to the state of the wall. I want you to get this, although I shall come back to it again. You look at that wall and examine it, and you can look through it, so to speak; and in looking through you see that the conditions of the Lord's people tally exactly with the condition of the wall. There are all sorts of wrongs and evils and errors, and that is the rubbish, that is the broken-down state of things. You see, the people's state corresponded to the state of the wall; the wall was just an illustration of spiritual conditions: so that when you come to 'look through' this wall, you find that what you are dealing with really is not a wall but spiritual conditions; and as Nehemiah went forward to deal with the wall, he found that he had at the same time to deal with spiritual conditions in the people. They were one and the same thing. It would in effect be foolish to put up a beautiful wall when the conditions behind the wall were a contradiction. You see the point? The two things must be consistent - the spiritual state and your testimony. The testimony must have a spiritual condition behind it. A spiritual condition must support the testimony. You cannot work upon building up something that is not in the energy of truth.

We shall see further what the wall means, and what the wall is made of; but for the time being, the Lord bring us into His own vision, into His own intention, and energize us with the same energy as that which possessed His servant Nehemiah and His servant Paul, and many others whom He has used to recover

something more of the testimony of His Son.

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