

The Warfare

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the unique spiritual warfare faced by believers in pursuing God's ultimate purpose, highlighting the nature of opposition and the importance of a genuine relationship with the Lord.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 23:3, Nehemiah 2:10, Nehemiah 4:2-3, Nehemiah 6:11, Matthew 16:22-23, John 11:48, Galatians 4:29, Ephesians 6:11-12, Ephesians 6:18, Hebrews 12:8

Topics: "Perseverance in Faith", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks discusses 'The Warfare', emphasizing the unique and intense spiritual conflict associated with fulfilling God's ultimate purpose. He illustrates this through the opposition faced by Nehemiah in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, highlighting the various forms of antagonism from figures like Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, who represent a blend of superstition, false religion, and carnal interests. Sparks points out that true opposition often arises not from the world, but from within the church, where individuals may profess faith yet resist the fullness of God's purpose. He stresses the importance of watchfulness and intelligent prayer in overcoming these challenges, as the enemy seeks to thwart God's work through various tactics such as intimidation, misrepresentation, and discouragement. Ultimately, the sermon calls believers to remain steadfast in their mission, recognizing the spiritual warfare that accompanies the pursuit of God's calling.

Transcript

A Peculiar Warfare

We come now to the warfare, the warfare related to the full testimony of the Lord or the Lord's testimony in fullness and completeness. Let me say again at once that this is a peculiar warfare. There is a warfare relating to the salvation of the unsaved, which involves all who seek to bring to the Lord those who know Him not. We know very well that it is a real battle and there is real warfare associated with that. There is that warfare which relates to being a Christian and just going on as a Christian. It is not an easy thing to continue in the way of the Lord. Most of the militant hymns that we sing have to do with the Christian life in general, and they certainly have a rightful place, because the Christian life on one side is truly a warfare. But when we have said that, we have not said all. There is a peculiar warfare connected with the Lord's ultimate purpose. The warfare becomes of a different character, is in a different world, and takes different forms, when it is related to this, and it is with that that we are occupied in our present meditation.

So, coming back to this book of Nehemiah, which, after all, is only an illustration of the spiritual and heavenly realities which we find in the New Testament, particularly in such parts as the letter to the Ephesians and the book of the Revelation, we find ourselves in the presence of a very great deal of conflict, which takes on a peculiar form because of the thing that is in view. It is that wall that is the trouble, or the cause of the trouble; that is to say, the recovery of a full expression of what the Lord wants concerning His people; and that provokes a great deal of very positive and persistent antagonism of a particular character.

The Enemies

If you look into this book, you will find that there are a number of people mentioned who are the sworn foes of this particular object, so we look at these before we look at their methods and the forms of their opposition. There is Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. Who are these people? what are they? what are they doing here? how have they got here? And when you answer those questions you get very near to the heart of things as to spiritual opposition. You go back to the second book of Kings, chapter 17, and you read from the twenty-fourth verse to the end of the chapter, and you have the whole thing explained. We will not read all those verses now, but just enough to lead us into the situation.

"And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Avva, and from Hamath and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel and they possessed Samaria and dwelt in the cities thereof. And so it was, at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they feared not the Lord: therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them. Wherefore they speak to the king of Assyria, saying, The nations which thou hast carried away, and placed in the cities of Samaria, know not the manner of the God of the land.... Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, Carry thither one of the priests whom ye brought from thence; and let them go and dwell there, and let him teach them the manner of the God of the land. So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the Lord. Howbeit every nation made gods of their own, and put them in the houses of the high places which the Samaritans had made, every nation in their cities wherein they dwelt... So they feared the Lord, and made unto them from among themselves priests of the high places, which sacrificed for them in the houses of the high places. They feared the Lord, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away" (verses 24-29, 32-33).

These are the people with whom Nehemiah had to contend, and who sought to frustrate or hinder the continuing of this work. Let us look at them, and see what they are made of, what is the stuff of which they are made.

Superstitious People

First of all, they are superstitious people. They see certain things happening and they draw the conclusion that those happenings have some background of a supernatural character. They do not know the Lord and they do not know that this thing is from the Lord, but they come to the conclusion that it has a supernatural background, it is something occult. They think if only they can find out the secrets of the supernatural realm, can be initiated into the mysteries of it, they will be able to clear up this situation, and so they proceed. They make their complaint to the king of Assyria, mark you, about the Lord, and he sends one of the priests who had been taken away from the land, and he tells them about the Lord - but the thing is so unreal, so false, in such a wrong, altogether wrong realm. You have a statement here which

is almost unthinkable: "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods". 'Fearing the Lord' there does not by any means mean what the fear of the Lord means amongst the Lord's people. To fear the Lord means that He really is the Lord, and that you have become utterly and completely subject to Him as Lord. That is fearing the Lord in the true sense. But that was not true of these people. They had superstitious recognition of Him, born of fear, misfortune, difficulties, things going wrong, but their knowledge never brought them really to the Lord. They went on serving their own gods. These are the people. That is the first thing that we take account of.

This statement, made more than once, that they feared the Lord, must have implied something. I do not know what to say about the priest or what to think about him. He evidently spoke about the Lord, about Jehovah, taught them something, but they merely received it second-hand for their own convenience, to save them in their troubles. So we may conclude that they used the Lord's Name, they probably offered Him some kind of recognition. They took on a form of worship which was ostensibly to Him, but right deep down they knew not the Lord. They were using the Lord's Name and using the Lord's things, but were mere professors, without any real knowledge of the Lord. Their religion was an imitation, a second-hand thing, not something of the heart.

And then you notice that, in any case, they are all the time referring and deferring to Babylon. They are in servitude to the king of Babylon. And so, because of all these things, there was plenty of ground for this hostility to Nehemiah. The real test of them was their attitude toward this thing which is of primary importance to the Lord, the thing which is truest and nearest to the heart of God. How do they stand related to that? That finds them out.

No Living Relationship With the Lord

We could have proceeded from the other end, and said, 'Now, here we have some people, with leaders whose names are mentioned, who are hostile to this that is so important to God and to Heaven. That is their position, that is their attitude, that is their spirit. Why is it?' The answer essentially is that they have no real relationship to the Lord. Whatever may be their profession, whatever may be their phraseology, whatever may be their pretence, their form, they themselves have really no living relationship to the Lord. That is where we begin with these people.

But we go a little further, because we have some of their leaders mentioned, and these men were outstanding men.

First of all there was Sanballat, who is called "the Horonite" (Neh. 2:10). That simply means that he came (probably) from Beth-boron, a Samaritan city; he came from one of the towns of Samaria. He was one of those people who had been placed in the land by the king of Assyria; they are described in the chapter from which we have read. He was one of them, he was after that kind.

Then you have Tobiah. You notice the pronunciation - Tobi-jah. It does not sound like that in your Bible, but that is the right pronunciation. You notice the end of his name is 'Jah', 'the Lord'. This man is ostensibly linked up with the Lord in some way. But Tobiah is an Ammonite, and you remember the word in Deut. 23:3: "An Ammonite... shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation shall none belonging to them enter into the assembly of the Lord for ever". And then the reason is given: "They hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee". This is the background of Tobiah: something which is impinging upon God's inheritance, in a kind of link and association with Him, but really in nature inimical to the Lord. That is Tobiah, the Ammonite.

And if we get right back behind him, we remember that Ammon was one of those children of Lot through his own daughters - one of the most tragic and terrible things in the whole of the Old Testament. So that Ammon has to be numbered among those mentioned in Hebrews 12:8: "If ye are without chastening, ... then are ye... not sons" - false children, the horrible word which we refrain from using; false children, pretending to be children of God. That is Ammon through Lot: in association with God, with Abraham, but inwardly not of the pure seed of Abraham, not of the pure seed of Israel, not of the pure seed of God's people. He has his name mixed up somehow with the Lord's people, but he is not a true son - he is a false son. That is Tobiah: a fleshly association with the land, but a spiritual alienation from the Lord, and persecuting the truly spiritual. As Paul puts it: "he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit" (Gal. 4:29); and so it is always.

We come to another man a little later on. He is Geshem, at one point called Gashmu, the same man, and he is called "the Arabian". He was either an Edomite or an Ishmaelite: whichever it was, it was very bad. You know their history, how they both of them warred against that which was spiritual. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, dwells much upon that. This one, Ishmael, born of the bond woman, warred against him who was born of the free woman. So the flesh wars against the Spirit, the earthly against the heavenly. Or he was of Edom, of Esau. How Esau fought against Jacob! He was against that which was in the line of sovereign election; he would indeed slay that at one point. Both of these, whether it was Esau or Ishmael, whether it was the Arabian from Edom or from Arabia, represent the conflict between the flesh and Spirit, the natural and the spiritual.

Carnal and Fleshly Men

Now you will know how full the New Testament letters are of this very thing. You find not only what I have mentioned, the hostility to the salvation of souls and the general conflict bound up with being a Christian, but you find a specific kind of assault wherever God's fuller purpose is brought into view. If Paul represents anything at all, he represents the full and ultimate purpose of God. It is through him that we have the wide, vast range of the eternal counsels and purposes concerning the Lord Jesus, and it was with assaults related to these very things that Paul was having always to contend, in peculiar ways. They did not seem to bother Peter so much. James had his difficulties, John had his difficulties, but Paul seemed to have difficulties of a peculiar kind.

Take these Judaizers, to begin with, who were always on his track. He never went anywhere but what they were soon on his heels to undo his work, to destroy his ministry, to defame his name, to undercut his apostleship. What sort of people were these Judaizers? They were not all the non-Christian Jews. If the letter to the Galatians is true, what these people were saying to the Galatian churches was: 'Christianity - yes, we allow it, we permit it, we recognize it; but after all, it is only an attachment to Judaism - it is a kind of supplementation of Judaism'. They would make it a Jewish Christianity. You remember how the Jews, the Jewish leaders, went down to Antioch to try to get the Christians to recognize the Jewish law and to incorporate it into Christianity, to observe all the Jewish rites and still be Christians. The whole letter to the Hebrews is on that matter. But here are Christians who are being tempted, not to give up the law, to depart from the law, to cease to recognize and own the law - that is not the question at all - but to add this Judaism, the law and its practices, to their Christianity, and combine the two. They were told, 'You must be circumcised, you must do this and that, observe this and that.'

Paul regarded this as subverting them from the faith. That was turning their back on Christ. The men who taught thus were Paul's real enemies. I am not saying that they were all converted men; but I am saying

that they were in some measure associated with the Lord and yet were really inimical to Him. It was a strange mixture - taking the Lord's Name and yet being against the Lord's full purpose. That is the kind of thing that is related to the ultimate intention of the Lord. It is a peculiar kind of opposition. It comes, let us put it in a word, from carnal and fleshly men: men of influence, very often, who are actuated by natural interests and considerations. Oh, yes: they know the Lord, they will speak about the Lord, they will take certain forms of Christianity, they will be very loyal to fundamental truths of God and His Person, and so on and so on; but when it comes to this ultimate issue you find them out of sympathy and very often in hostility. They will go so far, but when the full thing comes into view they are not willing, and it is in that realm, in relation to God's full purpose, that the real and peculiar antagonism arises. Is it not strange that, when you are bent upon the whole counsel and purpose of God, you find your main opposition from Christians and Christian leaders, far more than from the world?

So it was when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem. These people were "grieved... exceedingly, for that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel" (Neh. 2:10). You cannot understand that. You say, 'Well, if these people had any knowledge of the Lord at all, any recognition of the Lord, if their talk about the Lord meant anything, they would say, "Anything you can do for the people of God, we are with you" '. But they are afraid - oh, strange anomaly! - they are afraid that if the Lord has more they will have less. It is true, and we have to be very faithful about it. It is a fact; it has always been so. These are the foes.

You find much of it in the New Testament - the envy of the Jews, the jealousy of the Jews. "If we let him alone... the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (John 11:48). They are afraid of losing something that is theirs, that they have sponsored, that they have taken up. 'If this goes on, we shall lose, we shall lose people; we stand to suffer some loss if this goes on.' You know how true that is. It is a peculiar kind of fear. It is an unreasoning fear - fear that they themselves have never analysed or looked into, as to why it is they are afraid; but there it is. We know, surely we know why, if they do not. There is a mighty kingdom which, while it will withstand the salvation of the unsaved and will try to make the Christian life at all times difficult, seems to be most malignant when the fullness of Christ, or Christ coming into His inheritance, is in view. That seems to arouse something extra, of a peculiar character.

The Forms of Opposition

For a moment or two let us look at the forms of the opposition. We have been saying that this particular object in view provokes a peculiar kind of hostility and conflict, and it will take any form that it can to defeat God's end. In this book of Nehemiah you find a constant opposition on the part of these enemies. They will try one form of tactic at one time; then, if that does not work and they are defeated, they will swing round to another angle and try from that; and if that does not work they will change again.

'Grief'

So you find in the first place that they were very "grieved" that a man had come. But that does not get very far, does not do much damage. We must look behind their great grief. Why were they grieved? Well, here again it would be such a perplexing thing, if there were a modicum of concern for the Lord's interests. Nehemiah explains his motive for doing this work of rebuilding the wall: "that we be no more a reproach" (Neh. 2:17). The existing state of things means that the Lord's people are under a reproach. Dishonour rests upon the Church - that is what it amounts to; the world does not think much of it; the glory of the Lord is veiled and there is reproach. You might think that these people, if they had any sincerity of motive,

would at least want to remove that reproach.

But there you get to the heart of things, because Satan's one object, as we said on a previous occasion, has always been to bring reproach upon the Name of the Lord. Always, by any means, along any line, if he can defame the Name of the Lord which rests upon the Lord's people, he will do it. They were very grieved that there was someone seeking to remove the reproach of the Lord which rested upon His people. A terrible thing, that. Paul got himself into a lot of trouble for that very reason. He tried to clear up that reproachful situation at Corinth, but there were those in Corinth who turned on him, who said all kinds of things about him.

Scorn and Ridicule

Then they turned to scorn. "What do these feeble Jews? ... if a fox go up, he shall break down their stone wall" (Neh. 4:2,3) despising, scornfully trying to make out that after all this does not amount to anything, it is not worth taking note of - don't take it too seriously! Some of the Lord's people cannot stand up to that sort of thing. They just go to pieces under it. You have only got to try to transfer to them an inferiority complex, and that has done it - down they go. But not Nehemiah. Nehemiah knows the reproach is not levelled at him and his fellow-workers - it is levelled at the Lord; and he says here: 'O Lord, You take note of Tobiah' (4:4,5). He passes that back to the Lord. But this action and attitude of despising is a very real one, a very real and subtle art of the Devil to try to bring home the idea that you are trying to be something which you cannot be, you are trying to do something that does not count for anything at all. All that you are doing, all the labour, all the suffering, all the cost: after all, what does it amount to? There is nothing in it! You will have your day and pass on and the whole thing will fizzle out!

If you take that on, you will not go beyond the first stages of this whole business of recovering the Lord's testimony. Though it is not right to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think or to give an undue importance to the ministry committed to us, if we have seen the heavenly vision of what God in purpose is after, we are clothed with a dignity that is not our own. Nehemiah afterwards was able to say, with true dignity born of the deepest humility: "Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being such as I, would go into the temple to save his life?" (Neh. 6:11). That is a dignity that is more than his personally. He says: "I am doing a great work". It is the dignity of a great calling. It is the great work, not what we are in ourselves, that gives the dignity.

Wrath

The wall is now coming on, things are coming to an end and the finish is in view, and now the enemies are very wroth. There is much significance in that kind of ridicule. The fact is the enemy is deeply stirred. This wrath means that Satan recognizes that here is something that he should take account of. Whatever he may put on outwardly, underneath he is aware that there is something here that is going to shake his kingdom to its foundations. Remember all that, if a day of wrath breaks out! It is an indication - it is really complimentary. It is an acknowledgment that there is something here worth while. You cannot explain the Devil's wrath except that he must recognize something even more than we recognize. There must be something that matters to him.

These enemies were very wroth, and out of their wrath they conspired to come and fight. But this became known to Nehemiah, and he took special measures. He armed the people who were working, not only with a trowel in one hand, but with a sword in the other. When the enemy's plans are known, half the battle is yours. So the conspiracy failed.

Subterfuge

The opposition took many other forms. You know about the letter. "Let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono" (Neh. 6:2), 'and talk this over'. Very cunning. Nehemiah is alive to it: they meant to do him harm, they meant to assassinate him - that is what it amounted to. And he said: "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down". That failed, but the enemy is subtle. He will try to get us in some way to a place where we compromise, come to some agreement with him, find some terms where he can get an advantage, where we can be put out. The Apostle Paul concentrates all his great argument on spiritual warfare on that very point. "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:11) - against his subterfuges.

Misrepresentation

Then misrepresentation. 'It is reported that you intend in the building of the wall to make yourself king, and to have it proclaimed that there is a king in Jerusalem, and you are appointing prophets to preach of you' (Neh. 6:6,7). When the enemy tries that line it is sometimes very disconcerting. It is a horrible suggestion. 'You are trying to make a name for yourself, to get a position for yourself; all this, after all, is only a secret motive of yours to get notoriety, to be something and to do something that will make the world take note of you.' If you have any meekness at all, that shaft is a very dangerous, cruel one - God only knows what it costs. The enemy tries to impute a false motive to all your labours. 'After all, you only have your own ends in view, trying to do something, to make a name.'

Yes, the enemy will stop at nothing - lies or slander. The answer is, 'What is the truth about this? is this true?' After all, let us stand back from these lies of the enemy, and say, 'Is it true? Have I anything to set over against that?' Nehemiah's reply was: "There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart". Our answer is, 'These imputations are not true! If I had been seeking my own ends, I would have taken a very different course from this. If I had wanted to do something grand and great, that everybody would accept and recognize and acknowledge as a great piece of work, I should not have taken this course'. We can reply with Nehemiah: "There are no such things" - it is lies and slander.

Intimidation

And then there is intimidation. Here is a man to whose house Nehemiah went. Nehemiah, with all his uncompromising spirit, seems to have been a very friendly soul, and he went to see this man one day in a friendly sort of way. This fellow feigned to be his friend and to be very concerned for him, and said. 'We had better go into the temple and shut the door, because they will come and kill you'. But Nehemiah retorts: 'Should I flee to the house of God to save my life? I will not go in'. This was a false friend, after all; right in close proximity, a Judas. This was such a one as would say to the Lord Jesus: "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall never be unto thee". Although those words came audibly through Peter - none other than Peter - the Lord immediately says: "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men" (Matt. 16:22, 23). Coming through a friendliness is a suggestion of the enemy to create fear. Nehemiah puts his finger right on the spot - 'they would make us afraid'. If the enemy can get fear in, we are finished.

Tiredness

You read the book, and you can see all this from the outside. And then comes this from the inside: "The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed" (Neh. 4:10). The people got tired, got weary. Perhaps there is no greater enemy to going on with the testimony than tiredness. You know something about that. Even when you get physically tired, what a tremendous force that can be to discourage. Does not the enemy rush right in on tiredness? Let us get mentally tired, where we feel we can no longer cope with things mentally - and what a perilous position that is.

"The strength of the bearers of burdens" went, and that was a perilous moment, and Nehemiah had to take special measures in the presence of tiredness. Oh, be on your guard. It is not just that the enemy makes you tired. Sometimes he does: I think sometimes a good deal of tiredness is due to his wearing out, his drive. But sometimes he gets us to do a lot of unwise things that we should not do, so that we bring tiredness on ourselves, and he thus gets an advantage to himself. But whether that be the case or not, always remember that the enemy will take hold of tiredness to stop you going on, to destroy your testimony. It is a perilous moment. You need to take special precautions in the moment of tiredness.

The Need for Watchful, Intelligent Prayer

This is the warfare. We have just entered a little into the nature of it, the forms that it takes, but you notice that the salvation of the whole situation was due very largely to close watchfulness. If Sanballat and Tobiah and all the rest had their secret informants of all that was going on inside, and they did, Nehemiah also had his information coming through. He kept very closely in touch with what was happening in the enemy's ranks, and his close watchfulness, coupled with his persistent prayerfulness, was the secret of the victory. "Watching unto prayer" (Eph. 6:18). It is not enough to pray - we must pray intelligently. We must pray with information, with knowledge, with discernment, with perception, for these things are the strength of effective prayer.

So the victory and the completion of the testimony were largely due to this watchfulness unto prayer, seeking at every point to guard against what the enemy was doing, in a suitable way. That is a subject in itself. Here, truly, is a warfare! The fact is, that, when God is seeking to do a new thing in recovering something more of His whole purpose, this is fraught with intense and peculiar conflict. The conflict may take many different forms, but the object of all is one - to make the work cease.

The Lord keep us moving on to the end.

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