

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

June 3, 2012

“Building with Sword and Trowel”

No. 3622

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

In the last weeks we have been following Nehemiah, the man who returned to Jerusalem to build the walls of the city of God. With Nehemiah, we have seen that we too, as believers, are called in the same work.

What are the walls of Zion? They refer to everything that the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh would want to be torn down in the Christian life. Building the walls of Zion refers to the gathering, defending, and preserving of the church of Jesus Christ by the preaching of God’s Word. Building the walls of Zion refers to a faithful life with respect to the truth of God, a life of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, a life of fellowship with the saints. The walls of Zion are godly marriages and godly families that flow from those marriages. The walls of Zion are the personal lives of holiness to be built up in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, no sooner had Nehemiah begun to build the walls of Jerusalem in earnest and to show that he had not come to talk but to work, than also his problems began in earnest – opposition that dwarfed all of the trials that he had experienced to that point. There was opposition that was outside the ranks, and there was discouragement within the ranks of the Jews. That is always the case. In the words of the apostle Paul (II Cor. 7:5), “For, when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears.” The true work of the building of the walls of Zion must now, according to God’s own purpose, face great adversity. The purpose of God is, first of all, to drive us to Him for our strength. His purpose is, secondly, to increase our dependence upon the living God. And, thirdly, it is to make us more sensitive to the needs of each other.

Nehemiah is now faced, in chapter 4, with great opposition to the work of the building of the walls. But we will note that Nehemiah did not bemoan it, he did not curse it, he did not become pessimistic. But he showed the grace of perseverance. He showed the grace of strength and Christian love. We read in the chapter, “Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night” (v. 9). “I set them behind the walls with sword and spear. I rose up and said to the people, ‘Be not afraid. Remember, the Lord is with us.’”

Nehemiah is an example to us upon whom the ends of the world are come today, as we, too, are engaged in that same work and face the same adversity and opposition. He is an example of faith. He is an example of God-given, God-centered, and God-dependent faith. Nehemiah continued in the work because of God’s grace working in him mightily. His was a faith that knew how to use the tools God gave him. He placed in one hand of the men of Israel a weapon

of war, a sword to defend, and in the other hand a builder's tool, a trowel to build. He built with sword and trowel.

Chapter 3, which we looked at last week, gave a beautiful picture of God's people whose hearts were in the work, of how they went about to build the walls of Jerusalem in unity, with sacrifice, and in a display of great zeal. Waves of enthusiasm pulsed among them – the singing of the Psalms, and the smile of satisfaction in God's blessing.

But now chapter 4 brings us back to reality. There are moments of enthusiasm and excitement in the work of the Lord—for example, in the beginning of a new Christian school, the establishment of a new congregation, the first child born in a marriage, a honeymoon. But in chapter 4 we have the reality that in the work of the Lord we must expect to be bombarded with trouble, adversity, and opposition.

The trouble came, first of all, from outside, in the form of mockery, in the form of threat, and in the form of plots devised by those who were the enemies of what Nehemiah was doing because they hated Nehemiah's God. We are told of Sanballat and Tobiah. These two men, we remember from chapter 2:10, were grieved when Nehemiah came. They were grieved exceedingly that there came a man to seek the welfare of the Jews. The two men laughed when the Jews decided to heed Nehemiah's call to begin the rebuilding of the walls.

Sanballat means "sin gives life." He was a profane man. He was a governor in the area. And Tobiah was an Ammonite and was a false prophet. These two enemies tried three things to defeat the building of the walls.

First, they tried cruel mockery. If you read verses 1-3, you will find that when these two men heard that the walls were going up, they began to say, first to themselves, "What do these feeble Jews? Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice?" Then they began to mock. Tobiah said this: "Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall" (v. 3). They began with cruel mockery. They derided the purpose of these feeble Jews, of building the walls of Zion for the glory of God. They mocked them. They lampooned their enthusiasm. They magnified the problems that they would experience. Words are powerful. Words can hurt. The words of Tobiah and Sanballat were filled with sarcasm and bitterness. They said that even if a fox (which is known for its being light-footed and balanced), even if a fox would daintily walk upon the stone wall that they are building, that stone wall would fall down.

The second thing they did was try to bully Nehemiah and the people. As the work continued to progress and walls were joined together, the enemies held counsel of war from all the areas surrounding Jerusalem. They marshaled their forces before Jerusalem, thinking that their presence, a show of force, would be enough to drive the people off the walls and cause them to give it up.

Then they tried to scare them with intimidation. We read of that in verses 11ff. Each morning the workers who had gone home to the surrounding villages would return to the work on the wall. The enemies said, "We will sneak in among them as they enter into Jerusalem. We

will pretend to be workers. We will sneak in among them and slay them. We will try the Trojan-horse approach.”

So the tactics were: scorn, bullying, and threats. Please take note. The prosperity of the true church of Jesus Christ is a great grief, an irritation to the world. It angers the forces of sin. When you make progress in sanctification in your own life, repenting and forsaking sin, this provokes the devil. Faithfulness in marriage and not living together before marriage but living pure and chaste—this angers the world, this incenses the forces of darkness, so that they become dedicated to destroying you in that way of holiness.

But note: all opposition to you must not turn you from your duty. The ridicule that you receive for your walk of life, the looks of scorn, and the jokes heaped upon you—these must not drive you from your Christian duty.

But the adversity that Nehemiah experienced was not only from the outside. He was faced with discouragement within the ranks that was even more threatening to the work. The people of Judah came to Nehemiah to tell him of the difficult working conditions and that they were tired and that the dangers to which they and their families were being exposed were great. We read, “And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall” (v. 10). Their strength is decayed. They were teetering, tired, so tired they could hardly stand straight anymore. They were staggering. A couple of weeks tussling with boulders up the cliff had drained their strength. They had begun the work but now it was very plain that what was involved was a great effort and it promised only more in the future. The demands had increased.

Secondly, they were exposed to a danger in their families. We read, “And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came [that is, their adversaries], they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you” (v. 12). That is, the men who lived in those outlying villages were repeatedly being threatened that in their absence their families would be attacked. Or, when they came home exhausted from the work, they would be ambushed.

Picture Sanballat placing his thugs, his bullies, on the street corners as a man went early to work. “Hey, buddy. Going to work on those walls, huh? Wife and children home alone, are they? You’re going to come back tonight tired. You had better watch your back.”

The difficulties, the discouragements, the fears, and the weariness of the people of God were very real. They constituted as great a threat to the work as the opposition from the outside. In fact, a greater threat. It is easier to *begin* the work of the Lord in the church, in a Christian marriage, in a Christian family with little children, than it is to *continue* it. Pessimism and hopelessness and despair and inward cynicism (I can’t, it’s too costly, the threats are too great) are great enemies. Pessimism is a greater enemy than atheism. Unbelief is a threat to us. Despair and hopelessness sap our strength. And pessimism distorts reality. The people were beginning to say, “We are not able to build the walls.” That was not true. Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

What did Nehemiah do? Three things.

First, he prayed, and he had the people pray (vv. 4, 5). “Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity: and cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders.” So immediate, so spiritually engrained is prayer in Nehemiah that here he does not even announce it. He just breaks right out into prayer. He stands with the builders and he hears Sanballat and Tobiah and all of their ridicule. And he does not respond in a verbal battle. He does not say, “Oh yah? Well, you listen here!” He does not begin to spar with them. He does not begin to mix it up with them. This was not his weapon.

And these are not our weapons. We do not battle scorn with scorn, ridicule with ridicule, cut-down with cut-down, jeering with jeering. Those are not our weapons. The weapons of the church are not the refurbished weapons of the world. You may not use those weapons as you go about your work, wherever you are—in the church, in marriage, in the family. You may not use the weapons of the world. Use the weapons of God.

Nehemiah prayed, and his prayer centered in God: “For they have provoked thee to anger before the builders.” Now, get that! You would expect that something they were saying would hurt him. One of the arrows that they had shot at him would lodge in his soul. But, to Nehemiah, it was not about *his* leadership, not about *his* work, not about *his* ability as a bricklayer, or *his* motives. But it was about God. He does not try to defend *himself*. He sees that the insults are directed at *God Himself*. He prayed that God would take care of His own name. And he had the people pray that way. He said, “Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God.”

How full of significance. How pregnant with truth for us. How rich is the application. You cannot build the walls of Zion in your own life, you cannot labor in the church, you cannot labor in behalf of the kingdom of God, without prayer. You cannot shield yourself from the darts of sarcasm and the threats of this world, without prayer. What is your first response? To return in suit? To pick up the weapons of the flesh? To use what is at the disposal of the flesh—your tongue and further sharp words?

Nehemiah viewed all of these things as foolishness. But he went in prayer to the present God. He believed that the issue ultimately was God and that God would and must maintain His honor.

The second thing that Nehemiah did was that he took action. He did not panic. He looked around, he surveyed, he assessed the situation. He took time to evaluate. Prayer led to action. Prayer made him decisive. I think one of the most memorable statements in the book of Nehemiah is the one found in chapter 4:9: “Nevertheless [and this is in the context of the slander thrown against his work] we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night.” We prayed, then I set a watch. Prayer led to prudent, decisive, courageous action. He did not pray and waffle. He did not pray and then, at the end of his prayer, throw up his hands in confusion. He did the next prudent step decisively. In the conviction and in the

calmness of his Lord, he put men out to stand watch, so they would be alerted if there was any threat of physical danger. He did not pray and bemoan. He did not pray and send out a scouting party to see how many men Sanballat had. But he prayed...and he set a watch. Putting his trust in God, he arranged for a defense of the weak spots of the wall. He gave to families swords and spears. He announced to the enemy that their threats would meet with resistance.

And he thought of the people with compassion. He said to them, “Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren...” He made changes in the work schedule to alleviate bone-weariness by organizing work into parties – those who would bear burdens and others who would be builders. Then he had every man strap a sword on, put a trumpeter by himself, and told the people, “When you hear the trumpet, you gather to me and we will fight.”

Beloved, Nehemiah did his duty. How often does opposition, weariness, adversity, and fear cause us to freeze in indecision or to drop our hands and say, “Go ahead then. Roll over me. I give up.” We have so much more than Nehemiah. We have the full Scriptures – the crucified Lord, and Jesus’ promise: “I will build my church.” Do we wait for problems to go away before we will work? Do we expect we can do good only if there are no negatives in marriage? Do you say, “Well, I’m not going to. It’s just too hard...until she....” Is that what you say? In the church: “Why should I until they....” No, Nehemiah prayed, and then took action.

And in the third place, Nehemiah equipped them with sword and trowel. Everyone had a sword. We read, “They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon.” Those who did not need both hands for working, who were harnessed to a sled pulling, they had their sword ready. The rest, equipped by Nehemiah with a trowel, had their sword strapped to their side.

Both sword and trowel were needed. The sword of the Word of God—to defend us from the temptations of the world, the sins of our flesh, the heresies, the waves of despair infiltrating our heart. Beat them back by the sword of the Word of God. Through the preaching, through catechism, through the creeds, through Christian discipline, keep the church free from ungodliness. Maintain your life of holiness.

And a trowel. That is a brick-layer’s tool. It is short and wide to carry the mud, to smooth out the mortar, to lay each brick evenly and carefully. A trowel to build up in the Word of God, to encourage, to make our life firm, to give peace, hope, and strength of soul. This is an important point. Do not confuse these two. A sword is not a good tool for laying bricks, and a trowel is not a good weapon for defending a breach. I have seen the sword used wrongly in building the walls of the church and in marriage. When there are issues and questions and weaknesses among the people of God—areas where there is the need of growth and maturity and understanding—one may say, “I have my position, and it’s the only position. This is the *only* way to do it.” Then instead of the trowel, the careful, patient use of the Word and the patient placing of each brick of truth into place, I hear the sliding of the sword out of the scabbard and the readiness to fly in and start hacking fellow believers with the truth. They use the truth as an

ax to smash the other person's head. How awkward it would be if you had to lay brick with a sword.

I've also seen the trowel used in place of the sword. I've seen that questions arise in the church over whether the Bible is inspired, whether creation is true, whether the fourth commandment is enforced, whether justification is by faith or by faith and works, whether homosexuality is just another lifestyle. And as the enemies of heresy and ungodliness approach and a breach is made in the wall, men wield a trowel in response, and churches say, "Well, I suppose we should make a study of this." The enemy has entered into the city to slay the truth, and the church comes out against them with a trowel.

Builders on the walls of Zion need to know when to use the sword and when to use the trowel.

Nehemiah continued in the work of the building of the walls. In verses 23 and 24 of chapter 4 we learn that he was ready to fight if attacked by Sanballat. He was ready to go on laboring in the face of much discouragement. He had the commuters (those who would otherwise go home each night) lodge instead within Jerusalem. And he himself did not take off his clothes for weeks except for washing. He practiced constant vigilance, readiness. He continued in the work.

Do we? Does adversity drive you from the working on the wall? Does weariness or fear drain your heart of the impetus to go on? Are you committed to stay at the work of God? In your personal call to holiness, do you say: "Oh, my sin is too great. I can't overcome it. Don't be naïve, preacher, I can't be delivered." Do you talk like Sanballat before the call of Jesus Christ who says, "Repent! Follow Me! Deny yourself!" Do you say, "What can I, a feeble Christian do? How in the world can I revive the stones that are fallen down in my life? I can't put this back together." You say, "I've yelled all my life at my kids. I'm not going to be able to change." Do you say, "I just don't get along with that person, and it's never going to be any different"? In your marriage, do you say: "It's just too hard to pick up the pieces anymore"? Are you weary of the burden and say, "We can't build the wall. The cost is too great"?

May God raise up Nehemiah-like faith, Nehemiah-like love, Nehemiah-like strength and prayer and action. May God put a sword in your hand and a trowel in your other hand. And then may God raise up in us the kind of knowledge of God that Nehemiah had—the knowledge of a God who is present, a God who hears, a God who will maintain the honor of His name, a God who in mercy will use His servants for His good, a God before whom the enemy is puny (a bunch of loud-mouths), a God who is committed to us.

Our God shall fight for us. So we labored in the work and the wall was built.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word. And we pray that Thou would apply it unto our hearts today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

June 10, 2012 Ought Ye Not to Walk in the Fear of God?

No. 3623

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

O

ught ye not to walk in the fear of God? Let that question hang over your soul today. It is a rhetorical question. You know the answer. Of course it is “Yes.”

You who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ from the cruelest bondage and slavery of sin, ought you not to walk in reverence for God? You who have been given to belong to God’s glorious cause and covenant and given the privilege to represent Him and to work in His church, ought you not walk in the fear of God? You to whom God has shown such mercy, kindness, and faithfulness, and who have received the blessing of His covenant of fellowship, ought your life not be characterized by reverence for God?

Ought you not walk in the fear of God towards your brother? Ought you not be forgiving? Ought you not be forbearing? Ought you not be understanding and compassionate toward one another in marriage, in your weaknesses, towards your sister, towards your husband, towards your brother? “Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?”

Beloved, if God so loved us, ought we not also to love one another? Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ’s sake, hath forgiven you. Ought ye not to walk in the fear of God because of the reproach of the heathen, our enemies? What will the unbelieving world say about your God if you who confess His name and represent His cause do not walk a new and holy life? Is your life, as a believer, is mine, the occasion for the name of God to be blasphemed among the unbelieving world?

Is God reproached because of how we treat each other in the church? What is said about God in the way you think about your fellow church member, how you treat each other? And how you live within your family (husband and wife)—what is said about God in how you live together as husband and wife, or as a congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ?

What is your answer? What do you have to say when confronted by God’s Word?

There is a silence of conviction. We read in Nehemiah 5:8, “Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer.” There is a promise of repentance (v. 12): “Then said they, We will

restore them, and will require nothing of them.” Then there is the vow to keep the promise (v. 13): “And the people did according to this promise.”

Continuing our study of the book of Nehemiah, we come today to the fifth chapter. In each chapter God’s servant Nehemiah is confronted with yet another crisis, a problem always more grievous than the one formerly endured.

The crisis of chapter 5, which Nehemiah addresses with the heartrending cry: “Ought ye not to walk in the fear of God?” came when Nehemiah’s hands were full and his mind was absorbed in the great struggle of building the walls. His plate was full. He could hardly be blamed if he said when another problem came to him: “I’m overwhelmed. You will have to see to this problem. Don’t you understand? I haven’t even changed my clothes for the last two weeks.”

We must learn that God works this way in Nehemiah and in us. We must not think that just because we are enduring a great trial now that we ought, therefore, to be exempted by God from enduring yet more.

The problem that Nehemiah faced in chapter 5 could not have come at a worse time, humanly speaking. He was enduring bitter slander, threats, and plots from the enemies to get the work of rebuilding the walls to cease. And it was at that time, when his hands were full and he was fully engaged in a great work, that the people, according to verse 1 of chapter 5, came to him. Specifically, the *wives* came to him with a great cry, a great lament. And the cry is this: “Our families are starving. We can’t buy corn. We can’t mortgage our property for cash to get groceries and to pay real estate tax. We can’t pay. Our wealthy brethren want 12% on the dollar. And they have taken our land in default. Now, for payment, they want us to give them our sons and daughters as slaves. And some of our daughters have already been sold as chattel.”

That was the most serious problem yet, as Nehemiah knew. Worse than Sanballat’s words and worse than the weariness of the bricklayers. It was the threat of sin among the people of God. Nehemiah knew that, though he might build Jerusalem’s walls ever so high and ever so thick and ever so strong, it would all be meaningless if such sin among the people of God would be tolerated, if the people of God did not walk in compassion for each other. The church may be strong in head-knowledge, but what is the life within the walls? How do the saints treat each other? What about the marriages? What about the families? What goes on within? It is there that the devil seeks to destroy a church. It becomes a false-front for the enemy. Like the neighborhood store, perhaps in Chicago, which has its sign up for vegetables and flowers and ice cream—only as a front for the mob to do drugs and for prostitutions and for loan sharks. This is how the devil would seek to have the orthodox church—as a front. On the front are the signs of orthodoxy, but within are the evil works of backbiting, callous indifference, malice, and whispering.

Exactly what was the problem? We learn of it in verses 1-5 of chapter 5. Economically it was a hard time. Ever since the return from the Babylonian captivity it was tough. Many families had not been able to get their feet under them. Due to a dearth, or famine, it had been especially hard. And in Nehemiah’s day it was hard to get grain or food. No doubt the enemies restricted the trade. But, remember, many farmers had left their fields to work on the walls. And

Nehemiah had wanted them now to stay within Jerusalem to continue the work. Their wives and children were home alone. There were large families. The daughters and sons were many. It was hard for these families to put bread on the table, to feed hungry mouths, while their dad was gone working on the walls. Then there was the king's tribute, the tribute to the king of Persia. There were taxes to pay. And the result was this: In order to buy groceries, they were forced to mortgage their property (land, vineyards, houses) so that they could buy corn. They borrowed money from wealthier brothers of the Jews. They used their property, then, as collateral. And they were charged interest—as high as 12%. When the property tax came due, and when the taxes came due for the Persian government, they had to borrow again. “We have borrowed money for the king's tribute,” they tell Nehemiah. And when they could not pay their brethren back, then the brethren foreclosed and took their land and vineyards. And when, still, even the value of the land did not settle the account, then their brethren came and began to barter with them for their sons and daughters, for servitude to their creditors. They say it this way, in verse 5: “Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children.” Yet, they were being forced to sell them into slavery to their own brothers.

The complaint was this: “Nehemiah, we are at the mercy of our brothers. And they are heartless. They are cruel. We love our children as much as they love theirs. Yet, we have been forced to sell everything we have, even our children into slavery.” This was a grievous wrong. There was a great wail arising from the women against their brethren. That opposition was brought on by a grievous failure to love the brother in the love of God, by a lack of the bowels of compassion in Jesus Christ. It was brought on by greed and self-love and by self-advancement and by power and by monopolization and dominance. All of these things had cauterized the love of God in their heart. It was caused by “Me-first,” love of earthly things, resulting in an inward indifference to the need of one's brothers and sisters. Materialism makes a scrooge of the child of God.

And it had gone to unimaginable lengths. Sons and daughters were being taken from the arms of their mother. The times were tough. The bills needed to be paid. Now son and daughter had to be sold. Then there was this too: “We have to borrow money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards.” The creditors took the title. The creditors took the possessions and said, “You pay the past property tax. That's your debt, not mine.”

Shall we, then, simply pass on today and say, “Boy, that was heartless. That was really cruel.” We may not do that. We must seek to apply the Word of God to ourselves. That, you see, is our nature. Apart from grace, that is exactly how we would treat each other in the church and in our marriages and in the home. Do you see that? Do you forgive your brother his debts? Or have you been charging interest on that debt? Have you been vindictive, just waiting to get even? Do we do good to one another, thinking that this puts them in our debt and makes them beholding to us? Do we gossip about each other, backbite? Do we take away their land, their vineyard, their place among the people of God? Do we lower them to the place of a pauper? Do you berate your children? Do you oppress them? Do you deal with them in irritation and in anger? Do we show compassion to each other, or has this spirit of the age, this spirit of materialism, this spirit of “Me,” made the bowels of compassion to be constipated within us? “Do not let another person's need in the church or in the church throughout the world interfere with my time, my pleasures. I'm not going to sacrifice for them!”

Nehemiah took immediate steps to correct this sin. We read, “And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words.” We can understand that! Here Nehemiah is engaged in the great work of God’s cause – building the walls of Zion with blood, sweat, and tears; and this is how the people of God who are going to be benefited from his labors were treating each other? With such cruelty, with such absence of compassion? He was very displeased!

But note, he did not act in that anger. He mastered himself. He consulted, and he carefully prepared his response. We read, “Then I consulted with myself.” He thought it over. He did not allow anger to control his response. He pondered how best to approach this grievous condition. He views the men as erring brothers to whom he would appeal with spiritual argument and seek their repentance. He did not say, “Those reprobates, those charlatans! Bring them here. I’ll settle the score with those guys!” But he did choose firm, strong measures.

He called them to a great assembly. He did not decide to reason it out privately with each one. He decided to make it a public matter. He did not want to spend hour after hour with the problem. He wanted the people of God all to witness what he would say and what would be done. Strong, firm, unanswerable arguments in which he showed them their sin.

His speech to them can be summarized in three ways.

First, he appealed to the union that had been established in the blood of Jesus Christ. “And I said unto them.” This is, now, after Nehemiah has gathered the people and the perpetrators of this evil all together. “And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? Or shall they be sold unto us?” The returning captives from Babylon had done their best to purchase, to buy the release of fellow Jews who had been sold as slaves. They wanted them to be free. Why? Because they were their brothers. Nehemiah said, “How can you oppress your brothers by making them your slaves, we who have been trying to free every Jew? And you, in your business practices, are enslaving them? You are driving them to be your slaves?”

Behind this whole point of redemption, of course, was the picture of the precious blood of Jesus Christ that was to be shed for the church. Through the blood of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and made to belong to Jesus Christ. All of us have had a debt released that we could never have paid. And now, shall we treat each other that way? Can you treat a member of Christ that way—you who have been redeemed with the precious blood of Christ from a debt that you could never have paid?

His second appeal was this. “Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them.” Nehemiah was simply bringing the requirement of the Old Testament law that required that they could not take advantage of their poor brothers, that they could not charge usury, that they could not profit on loans, that they could not make another Jew, by compulsion, a slave, and that the debts had to be released in the year of Jubilee. “Restore them their possessions. Treat them as you would treat something of mine,” says God. God says, “I have redeemed you. Now you must treat them as I have redeemed you.”

Finally, Nehemiah appealed to the testimony that would be left of God's name. That was the heart of it (v. 9), "Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?" Everything that we say and do to each other as the people of God has to do with what is said about our God. The worst thing possible is that our life, as we live with each other, would give occasion for the enemies of God to reproach our God. You say that your God is merciful? You say that your God is gracious to the undeserving? You say that your God is the God of love unimaginable—to give His Son even unto hell for us? You say that your God has compassion on the lowly and is filled with lovingkindness for those who are destitute? You worship Him—and you are cruel, merciless, mean toward your brothers and sisters? You laugh at their mistakes? You hurt them with your words? You torture them when you get together by gossiping about them? You blow up—you cannot forgive? You hold a grudge? You cannot take anything? What kind of God, then, do you serve? You say your God is compassionate, but we do not believe you. We believe that your God is the same as you are—just as cruel as you are.

Beloved, our behavior with each other is our testimony of God. Our behavior with each other is louder speech than words spoken from our mouths. We can speak eloquently of the love of Jesus. But the world says, "I can't hear you. You are catty with your friends. You are bitter as a husband. You are resentful as a wife. You are not honest in your business. You are not pure with your eyes. You are just like us."

Everything we do with each other is our testimony of God. And the world is always watching. The world may not study the Bible. But the world does study those who profess the Bible. What a reproach of God when the children of God do not walk in love.

Nehemiah, as I said, was aiming at their repentance. The people acknowledged their sin and promised to make amends. "Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest." So the people were brought, by the grace of God, to repentance.

Then Nehemiah did something dramatic as a warning that they must walk in repentance. Verse 13, "Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied." This was very significant to the Jews. It was a sign. In other words, Nehemiah stood up and he shook the crumbs off his lap. And he said, "Just as I shake the crumbs from my lap, so will God shake out of His covenant, out of His people, out of His church, those imposters who do not walk in repentance that is seen in compassion toward their brothers and sisters."

God brought repentance.

We are left then with a pointed example. Nehemiah knew the power of example. He led the people of God from the front. He was a man himself of compassion and reverence for God and self-sacrifice. Therefore, Nehemiah did not oppose a legitimate tax for the support of the governor, something that former governors had done. But he used this as an example. He said, "I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor." Before him, the practice had been that a portion of the food had to be given, just given, to the governor. That was legitimate. That

was proper. But Nehemiah says, “No, not I. I don’t need it. I’m not going to sequester oxen and corn from you. I’m not going to do that.” Why? He says, “because the bondage is heavy upon this people.” He paid the cost of his own upkeep and of the functioning of his governor’s house. When visiting dignitaries on the way to Shushan stopped by his house as a governor, he bore the expense. He did not tax the people to pay for it. The example he gave was in his own life of sacrifice—an example of being aware of the needs of God’s people.

Then he concludes with these words: “Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.” He did not do this for the praise of men. He said, “If men forget me, that doesn’t matter. I’m not doing this for the recognition of people. But let my God think upon me. Let my God be pleased with me. Let my God say, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’” So he labored to promote the good cause of God’s people in self-sacrifice. And he himself lived as an example to follow.

Now we are back to the beginning. Ought we not to walk in the fear of God? Ought *we*, who have received the gracious pardon of God, the fullness of His covenant blessing, ought we not to seek our brothers and sisters’ good to edification?

The answer is: Of course, yes! Then, let us do that. Let us advance the cause of God. Let us show mercy and compassion to the destitute. Let us testify of the glory of our God. Let us do that by showing mercy and compassion and patience and forgiveness one to another. Let us do that because God has so loved us.

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we again thank Thee for Thy Word and ask that it may be the light upon our pathway in this week. Bless the study of Nehemiah and return us next week again to another portion from this wonderful book. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

June 17, 2012

O God, Strengthen My Hands

No. 3324

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

T

oday we return to our series on the book of Nehemiah. I ask you to open your Bibles to Nehemiah 6 and follow along.

In chapter 5, you will remember, we saw that a great wrong among God's people was corrected by Nehemiah – the wrong of wealthy brethren oppressing the poor families of Israel and showing an utter lack of compassion in the love of God. Nehemiah firmly corrected this: “Ought ye not to walk in the fear of God? Ought not the presence of God so work in you that you have compassion towards your brethren?”

Now, as we come to chapter 6, we see that Nehemiah, no sooner than resolving a problem within the walls of Jerusalem, must now turn again and face renewed opposition from those who stood outside of the walls —this time opposition that will be directed against him personally.

We read in verse 1 of chapter 6 that the enemies saw that the wall was being builded and there was no breach left therein. They have come to understand that threats of physical force will no longer be effective and that their slanders and trash-talk before the workers were not working. If the work, therefore, is to cease, they knew that they must act now against Nehemiah. They must get him out of the way, they must undermine him. If the leader topples, if the leader is discredited, the work will have no eyes and the work will have no force.

What is so instructive for us in Scripture is that it tells us plainly that the intention of the enemies was against Nehemiah and that they had this plot against Nehemiah (v. 9) in order that “their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done.” The enemies aimed at creating in the workers an inward weakening of resolve and heart, to wear them down with discouragement.

“Their hands shall be weakened from the work.” This is similar to the apostle's warning in Galatians 6:9, where he tells us that in the work of the church and kingdom we must not “be weary in well doing,” we must not be gripped by hopelessness. We must not say, “What's the use? Why are we doing all of this? It's too much. There's too much opposition. No one appreciates it. I'm throwing in the towel!” I would define discouragement in the work of the Lord in this way: the plot of the devil and our flesh to use the difficulties of our calling, whether that calling be in marriage, job, home, church, or personal life, to get us to look out at the

difficulties and then in at ourselves —but *not* up. It is the plot to get us to look out at the humanly insurmountable obstacles that are contrary to God’s promises, indeed to have us make a list of these impossibilities and for us to conclude that in the face of such opposition it is simply impossible to continue. Then to have us look inside of ourselves: “I have no more strength. I’m used up. I can’t go on. I can’t put up with this anymore in this marriage, in this church, in this work. I’m done.” To have us sink into self-pity and go off and pout and stew.

In this chapter we will learn that Nehemiah did indeed look out at the problems. He did indeed look inside of himself. But then he looked up. He says, “O God, strengthen my hands.” In terms of the full gospel that Nehemiah at that time did not have but we do, we must have faith in the ascended Lord Jesus Christ, who has the victory and who works through us His work. We must pray, “O God, strengthen my hands.”

In this chapter we read that there were four devious plots hatched by the enemies against Nehemiah.

The first: to kidnap Nehemiah. You will find that in verses 1-4. To remove him permanently. Sanballat and Geshem tried to lure Nehemiah out of the city, as they see that the work on the walls was nearing completion and that the workers were about to hang the doors of the gates. They say to Nehemiah, “Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono.” Ono is the valley of craftsmen. Perhaps they tried to lure Nehemiah there by suggesting that in Ono he could receive some valuable help for the hanging of the gates of the walls of Jerusalem. But the point is, it was outside of the province where Nehemiah had jurisdiction. In Jerusalem Nehemiah was guarded. Men stood before him, his brethren, with swords. His enemies now say to him, “Come, let us counsel together.” They begin to wave an apparent olive-branch. “Let’s talk things over. Let’s discuss our common interests. Let’s try to come to an understanding here.”

But Nehemiah says, “They thought to do me mischief.” His response is in verse 3. “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?”

I love that answer of Nehemiah. We ought to use it often when we are tempted to leave the path of duty and the service of God. Nehemiah is here very discerning, something that God gives through prayer. He understands the intent of their offer.

Do you? Do you, through prayer, understand the intent of the apparently innocent invitations: “You’re attractive. How about dinner Friday night?” “We’re having a party, a little bit of beer. Hey, come on over and we’ll watch some videos.” “Let’s discuss sexual behavior. Let’s discuss abortion. Let’s discuss euthanasia.” Often, under the guise of openness, the devil seeks to lure us away.

Nehemiah responded: “I am doing a great work.” That is what I love about it. “I’m captivated by this work. And my emotions and my love are all channeled into it, so that I don’t have the time of day for such an interruption. It’s a great work. It’s part of God’s work. It is the

work for His name, truth, people, and cause. I love that work and it gobbles up anything else in its presence.”

And we read in verse 4, “Yet they sent unto me *four times* after this sort,” four times they sent this apparently innocent appeal. And four times Nehemiah responds after the same manner: “I’m doing a great work. I do not have time to go to talk to you.”

The second plot was the wicked attempt to slander Nehemiah, verses 5-9, to make him afraid of the gossip and the common opinion of what others would think about him. We read that, in an open letter, Sanballat writes to Nehemiah of the common gossip reported among the heathen, verified by this man called Gashmu, who, Sanballat says, is a reliable source, “that it is the common opinion that what you are doing comes down to sedition—that many people think you are simply rebelling against the king of Persia—that you want to set yourself up as a king and that you have sent out heralds to sway the masses toward you. And what will happen if these reports reach the ears of the king of Persia—that his cupbearer is behaving in such a manner? You know, Nehemiah, you might not think there is much to these rumors, but there’s never smoke without fire. Come now, therefore, let us take counsel together. I’m speaking as your friend, Nehemiah. We had better get together to discuss what we can do about these attempts to ruin your reputation.”

Nehemiah understood that Sanballat said this “to make me afraid.” The tactics were obvious. We have all seen this and we are all susceptible to this. The desire to play on what people think about us – the very tool of the devil: “Do you know what they say? I think you should know what they say. Maybe it will affect your course of action. You and I need to do something to make you more credible, more believable.” The fear of suspicion. The attempt to defend ourselves in the forum of rumor and gossip.

Nehemiah’s response we read in verse 8: “Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart.” Nehemiah refused to be deflected, to be belittled, to be embittered. He does not say, “All right. Let’s bring everything out into the open. Let’s trace the source of this scandal. Let’s demand that unjust accusations be removed.” But he responds: “It’s not true. You are fabricating it to make me afraid. And it’s not going to work.”

And he prayed, “Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” That is instructive. It is not easy to handle unjust accusations. Nehemiah is the object of a smear campaign, of slander. But here Scripture is teaching us several things. First, when you are in such situations, go to God in prayer. Nehemiah sought to maintain integrity there before God. God knows the truth. That is all that matters in the end. Second, he does not descend into the court of rumor. He will not fight fire with fire. He does not seek desperately to clear himself in the court of rumor. If his conscience is clear, he will proceed with his God-given duties. And, thirdly, he knew the motive of all of this: to get the work to stop. What tool is more effective in the arsenal of the devil than this one: rumor? To cause stoppage of the Lord’s work. To cause stoppage through the tongue of gossip and rumor.

The third plot was to discredit him, to get him to disqualify himself by committing a grievous indiscretion. You read of that in verses 10-14. Nehemiah had a friend, Shemaiah, a prophet, who was shut up (that is, confined to his house in meditation). Nehemiah wanted to go to his house. And we can understand why—he was in need of spiritual strengthening. As any other man, Nehemiah sought encouragement. But it soon became plain that Shemaiah the prophet, his friend, had been bought by the enemies Sanballat and Tobiah. They had hired, bribed him. He had his price and they found it, along with most of the rest of the prophets.

We read that Shemaiah the prophet said, “Nehemiah, it’s too dangerous to meet at my house. They will come to slay thee. It’s too private. It’s too exposed. It’s too risky. We need to meet in the temple. We will be safe there to talk. We can shut the doors and they won’t dare to follow you into the temple.”

Now that sounded so plausible. But Nehemiah discerned the falseness. We read in verse 12: “And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him.” Why? Because only priests were given free access to the temple. For Nehemiah to go into that temple unannounced, unsanctioned, would be for him to commit ritual trespass and therefore to discredit him, to make him guilty of violating something important in the ceremonial law. In the Old Testament you will find that those who were in terror, who were desperate, who were hopeless in fear, ran into the temple thinking that they would find refuge there. It would be, for Nehemiah, to broadcast that he was scared out of his wits and was willing to commit a ritual trespass.

Nehemiah’s answer (v. 11): “Should such a man as I flee? And who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.” He was thinking of his position among the people of God, his responsibility. “Shall I do that? Should I go in and do this? No, I will not.”

The fourth attempt was to undermine him and sway his judgments. We read that in those days (eight weeks of wall-building, that is) the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah. And letters of Tobiah had come to them. During those two months Tobiah, that false religious leader and opponent of the walls, had been busy laying down a network of covert operators to infiltrate the camp of Nehemiah, to learn of Nehemiah’s plans and also to attempt to influence Nehemiah to have his milder views adopted. Tobiah had carried on correspondence with the nobles of Judah, courting their favor, holding out economic gains through alliances, and asking to be kept informed of what Nehemiah was doing. When Tobiah had sought to worm his way in close through marriage to one of these nobles’ daughters, these two (the two married ones) would attempt to soften up Nehemiah. They would say to Nehemiah, “You know, Tobiah is really not such a bad guy.” And they would tell Tobiah everything that Nehemiah was saying.

So, through money, and through marriage, the enemy sought to infiltrate God’s people.

Nehemiah, nevertheless, in the face of all of these plots to ensnare him, stood strong in his faith. He did not sink into despair, but he found grace to continue in the work of the Lord.

As amazing as it sounds, the work continued. We read in verse 15, “So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.” Nehemiah found strength

not only not to stop the opposition but to press on and to continue the work. Where did he receive this strength? He received it in prayer. As we come to know Nehemiah, we expect this of him. He was a man who was much in prayer. “O God,” he prayed, “strengthen my hands.” Persistent, fervent, daily prayer was the way that Nehemiah remained strong and clear-minded and able-hearted to continue in the work of the Lord.

Are you weary? Are you fearful? Are you ready to hang it all up in the work of the Lord, in your marriage, in the church, or wherever your calling is: as a pastor or whatever? Prayer makes hands strong for the labor of the kingdom.

Pray that God strengthen our hands by our laying hold of the righteousness that is in Jesus Christ, of the victory that is ours in Christ, that in Christ we are clear in the court of heaven and that God pronounces us justified. What then of the rumors of men? The victory is ours in Christ. We labor in His name. If through the perfect work of my Lord I am bound eternally to God whose mercies cannot fail, then I can endure the treachery even of supposed friends. If I know that through Christ my soul is secure eternally, do I need to fear men’s plots against me?

Not only was it prayer, but it was also the conviction that God was working in him. I find that in verse 16. There we read, “And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof [namely, that the walls were completed], and that all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.” That is very important. The heathen picked up on something that Nehemiah knew. They saw clearly that the strength behind this work was God’s. They did not like it. It grieved them. It made them cast down. It made them depressed—because deeply they knew that opposition to this God was futile. They had to recognize that the cause of God’s people is propelled by a power from a different world—from God. That is why the heathen, the world of unbelief, is, at bottom, fatalistic. Oh, yes, they are. The world of unbelief and all the causes of sin and all the causes of this world apart from God, in all their boastful, optimistic desires to advance their kingdom, are at bottom fatalistic. Satan’s kingdom is a fatalistic kingdom. They know that opposition to our God is futile.

But this is the knowledge that invigorates us. This is the knowledge that picks us up. The work is the work of God in us. Great builders in the kingdom of God are conscious of this. The apostle Paul (Col. 1:29): “Whereunto I labor, striving according to his working which worketh in me mightily.” Are you serious about God’s work, about building walls, the walls of truth and righteousness and glory to God in the church and in the home and the marriage and in your own personal life? Do you experience moments when all seems to cave in, when all there is is discouragement? You say, “How in the world can this prosper?” Look up then to God in prayer, to Him who sits upon the throne and see almighty God in Jesus Christ who works and no man shall prevent it. I am strong when I know that God will accomplish His work in me and that nothing can prevent it.

Then let us learn that the enemy of the work of God is subtle. The plots laid down by Sanballat and Tobiah were clever, persistent, and cunning. Behind them stands a far more evil foe, an enemy to whom men like Sanballat and Tobiah are mere pawns in his hands. The devil wages unceasing war to frustrate God’s work, to weaken our hands, to get us to stop the

Christian life. This is the way he works—the same way that he worked on Nehemiah—one plot under way and another plot under way and another plot under way—all to bring us down to discouragement, all to have us believe that the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the cause of the Christian church, the cause of the Christian life are in vain. He seeks to get you down to his ground.

He might say first, “Oh come, let us counsel together. Come out of the church. Come out of your family. Come out of a life of obedience. I’m not so dangerous.” If you withstand him, by the grace of God, you will find him to be persistent.

He will say, “There are some rumors that are going on around you Christians. Do you know that? I’m just telling you this in your best interest,” the devil will say. “It’s been reported to the child-protection agency that you are abusive to your children. It’s been reported that this theology, this Calvinism, is a radical, exclusivistic, hate-centered, bigoted religion. Now, let’s get together,” says the devil, “and let’s talk about this, how we can, perhaps, repackage this doctrine of Calvinism, this glory of God, to make it more palatable in our present situation.”

And if you withstand that, then he will say, “You know, you have been under a lot of stress. It will be OK for you to set aside the law of your God for a little bit. Everybody will understand that Christians too can, under pressure, commit indiscretion.” The devil is a master of manipulation. Let us stand fast. Let us look to the grace of God, which is all-sufficient. Let us believe that our God will be our strength, that the forces against the work of Christ are defeated.

No, we do not underestimate those forces. But they are defeated, for the grace of our God is sufficient. Because the cause that we represent in the church, in the home, in marriage, and in the Christian life is not ours. It is not our cause. It is God’s. And it is about His honor. Therefore He promises that all that comes against you will not destroy you. And you will experience sufficient grace, strength for today, bright hope for tomorrow. And you will see the wall of the kingdom of God built.

Let us pray.

Father, thanks for the Word. Sanctify it to our hearts today. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

June 24, 2012

Putting Things in Order

No. 3625

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

T

oday we turn to Nehemiah 7 in our continued series on the book of Nehemiah, the man who returned to Jerusalem to build the walls of Zion. Chapter 7 is going to announce to us that the walls are completed.

At first glance, as we peruse chapter 7, we might think that there is not really much for a solid spiritual meal in the chapter. It is interesting, perhaps. Nehemiah is going to appoint gatekeepers and singers and Levites to their various tasks. He is going to assign men to give instruction within the city and to draw up a schedule for guard duty. He is going to find a registry of the people who returned from Babylon to find out the demographics of the people in the hope of repopulating the city and encouraging the people to enter into the city and make the city their home. And then the chapter is going to end with contributions made for what we would call the general budget of the church, the funding of the work of the Lord in Jerusalem. We might conclude that there is not much here as food for our souls in our spiritual pilgrimage. But that is not so. Every word of God is tried and true. In fact, we often receive some of the richest and most satisfying spiritual food for the hungry soul where we would least expect to find it.

The significance of the chapter, I believe, is best explained by comparing it to what we read in Titus 1:5: “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.” There Paul speaks to Titus and says, “You must establish the order of the church, the things that are yet lacking that must be established.” God has established an order for His church, and that order is crucial. Nehemiah knew that order. Immediately upon the completion of the walls he goes about to put things in order for the well-being of God’s people.

We must understand that there is an order that the Almighty has given for the well-being of His church and people. And those things must be kept in order in the church – the worship of the church, the preaching of the church, the discipline of the church, the care of the people of God, providing for the needs of the kingdom of God, the budget of the kingdom of God – all these things, according to God’s own word, are crucial for the well-being, for the life, of the people of God and for the spread of that Word.

What was the first thing that needed to be done? The walls, we read, are up. A great work has been accomplished. We would be inclined to imagine that Nehemiah would want to take a vacation, that we would find him sitting back and saying, “Whew, it’s done. We made it!” But not Nehemiah. Nehemiah saw accomplishment of one task as the stepping stone for the next. Now the question before him is: “What’s next? What is the essential thing to do next?”

These were the questions confronting Nehemiah when the walls were up. God had strengthened his hands to carry on the building project through much opposition, both within and without. But Nehemiah knew that walls of stone provide no protection without guards on the wall. And well-guarded walls mean nothing if there are no people living behind them enjoying fellowship. It was the spiritual life and the well-being of God’s people that was the work of his hands—not concrete walls, not blocks and mortar. What was the next step?

We face the same question, as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps you hear this Word of God today and, by His mercy, you are a member of the church of Jesus Christ—a church that takes the Word of God seriously. If that is so, you might ask the question, “What’s the next thing? We have the creeds. We have the establishment of the truth. The congregation is gathering on the Lord’s Day. Marriages are being established. Family and children are there. Now what must be done to maintain that? What must be done in order that all of those things serve their purpose to build us up and to prepare us for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, to inspire us to live in godliness and to be faithful witnesses throughout the world of His truth?”

Nehemiah sees three things. He assigns three priorities, three essential things, for the maintaining of the church. These are the things that must be set in order. Number one: Nehemiah sees the need for defense, through men appointed to guard and rule. Number two: He sees the need of worship, through the Word of God. Number three: He sees the need of teaching, through men ordained of God. Let us look at those three things.

Number one. Nehemiah saw the need for the appointment of men for the guard and rule of the city or, what we read in verses 2 and 3 of Nehemiah 7, porters. Porters were gatekeepers. They were guards.

Now, do not think of them in terms of bellhops at the Palmer House or of men wearing elaborate costumes and carrying long-necked trumpets. They were, in those days, elite guards, trained, having a high degree of loyalty, men of courage. In the days of David and Solomon, they were Cherithites and Pelethites, orders of an exclusive, elite, trained guard. They were to check those who came in, opening the gates to citizens they recognized. They had to have a sixth sense for danger. They had moral responsibilities. Nehemiah tells them, for example, that they were not (chapter 13) to allow the heathen traders to congregate by the gates in the last hours of the Sabbath Day.

Then Nehemiah, in addition, appointed two men as rulers over Jerusalem, responsible for its defense: Hanani (“my brother,” says Nehemiah) and Hananiah. These two men were chosen because they were faithful and feared God among many. They were reverent and reliable. Nehemiah gave them instructions for defense. He told them when the gates were to be closed,

when they were to be opened, and that they were to appoint watchers of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Every man must assign a watch that was over against his own house.

So for us. God has appointed men for the good order of the church. This is what must be set in order for the church. He appoints men for the defense of the church, through their discipline and rule from the Word of God, namely, elders and pastors. Isaiah 62:6, “I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence.” Let us emphasize that these are to be men in the office of elder and deacon and pastor. The Word of God teaches that *men* are to occupy these positions—not women, but men who are given the gift of faithfulness, reliability, and reverence for God—to keep false teaching out of the church and to defend and to care for the people of God—men of loyalty, men of courage, men of love to God, willing to serve, not for their own advancement, not for their own name, but as true servants of God who see their own unworthiness and inability but have a love for God and for His people and for His church.

There is an application also to you fathers over your own house. We notice that Nehemiah says that everyone in his watch was to be over against his own house. The guard that was appointed at a section of the wall was appointed to guard the wall next to his house. He was not sent two blocks down, but over against his own house. The children sleeping behind him in the house that he could turn around and look at were his own. Each husband is assigned by God to be the guard of his family, to be the defender of his daughters’ purity, of his sons’ manhood, and to deliver them from the impurity of the devil. He is a defender of his wife, a defender of all that goes forth from and goes on in his home. He is to be the leader in the teaching of his children, joining with other Christian men to form Christian schools. He must not be, as a father, drowsy in this world, preoccupied with business and sports and leisure. He must guard the wall over against his own family.

The second thing that Nehemiah did to set things in order was to organize the worship through the Word of God. He says (v. 1), “I set up singers.” If you follow the idea of singers through the Old Testament, you will find it fascinating. We do not have time to go into that fascinating history, but let me say that it is very plain from the Word of God that singing was an important aspect of the worship of God. Nehemiah wants to set this in order. He wants to set in order worship, centered in praise, to the Almighty. He wants to hear arising from Jerusalem the voice of singing and melody, of praises to the Lord.

Singers. You ask, “Is that a priority? Is that essential?” Yes, it is. God says in the prophecy of Isaiah, “This people have I formed for myself. They shall show forth my praise.” The purpose of God in establishing His church, separated from the world, is that they might show forth the praises of Him who hath called them out of darkness into His marvelous light (I Pet. 2:9). What has priority in the church? The worship of God through His Word. The setting down of the order God has prescribed in His Word for worship. And then joining together in that worship to praise God, to sing, to lift up our souls in voices, to praise God for all of His goodness.

The third thing that we must have set in order is teaching through ordained servants of God. We read that Nehemiah set up the Levites.

The Levites were appointed not only for temple service, but to be Israel's teachers and pastors, to convey to the people the great realities of their faith. Remember that Joshua assigned 48 cities for the Levites. They were to travel throughout those cities teaching and preaching and instructing God's people in the hope of Jesus Christ. God had made this a priority. Malachi 2:7: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts." The priest was to show the people what God had said, and bring to the people the knowledge of the Word of God.

So also for the good order of the church today. We must have (1) men who rule – God-fearing elders and deacons and pastors; (2) sound, biblical worship, centered in the praise of the living God; (3) pastors and teachers. So we read in Ephesians 4 that God gave some to be pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. That is a priority. That must be set in order. That must, above all things, be there. We must not allow anything to frustrate or to hinder that. There must be in the church regular preaching and teaching and instruction of our children in catechism. So we pray for more pastors and for more preachers of the gospel.

Then we place ourselves under the preaching and the teaching of the Word of God by the church. We clear the calendar, we keep back the obligations. We prepare for Sunday. We are present in the church. We make Bible class a priority during the week. We receive the Word as it is taught by the appointed servants of God.

Now here are the things that must be in order if the church on earth is to prosper. We must appoint men to rule and govern in their office under the Word of God. We must have the worship of God, according to His Word, in Spirit and in truth. And we must have regular instruction by His servants. These are the essentials. These are the priorities. This is what Nehemiah set in order.

Nehemiah did this because he had a heart for the people of God. In the chapter we learn that underneath all of these things that he was doing was an abiding love for God's people and a desire that the people of God be spiritually blessed within God's city. We read that the city was large and great but that the people were few therein and the houses were not builded. The Jews who returned to the land had not repopulated the city. The homes that were there were dilapidated. Economically it was very hard to make a go of it by living within that city. Rather, the Jews had spread over the countryside in order to make a living.

Now Nehemiah, to remedy this, goes and gets a registry of all those who have returned. He finds out where these people are in order that he might now induce them to move into the city. We read in Nehemiah 11:1, 2, "And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities. And the people blessed all the men, that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem." This was extremely important. From a human point of view, if Jerusalem was to be strong it needed a population, an economy, homes, buildings.

But remember that all of this was a picture of the church. This is representing the thriving of the people of God within the instituted church of Jesus Christ. That needs to be put in order in

our day. It needs to be understood that there must be a living membership in the church, the body of Jesus Christ, a registry of those whom God has brought out of the bondage of sin and who are now listed among those who dwell in Jerusalem. People say, “Well, the church can’t save you.” No. No Scripture ever said that it could. But the saved are in the church. You and I must be convicted that it is the will of the Almighty that we be members of the true church of Jesus Christ, that God’s fellowship, joy, blessings are to be enjoyed there.

How men can, today, pride themselves about living in a city—New York or Chicago or Tokyo or Singapore! But the church is God’s own city. Populate her. Stay within the church of God. Marry in the church of God. Bring up families in the church of God. Labor for the blessing of the church of God. The church must not be desolate. The church must not simply be filled with old people. The church must not be a vacant home. Grow up in the church. Have your children grow up in the church. Throw in your lot with the people of God. Be decisive in your commitment to the church of Jesus Christ. Be involved in evangelism in your own congregation. Invite your friends to come to church. Explain to them the glorious and wonderful privileges of being a member of the body of Christ. The church is to be populated with the repentant children of God, with the grateful redeemed, with those who have been delivered out of the bondage of sin.

Not many left Babylon. A small percentage of the Jews came back. Most of the Jews desired the prosperity and the comforts of Babylon rather than the land of promise and the city of God that was decimated. It was the redeemed. It was those who knew the grace of God. They were the lowly outcasts. They were the little ones of the earth. Yet, they were the ones whom God had gathered and brought into His glorious church and kingdom.

This must be set in order among Christians today. Love the church. Enter her. Be a faithful member in the church—the church where the Word of God is honored, preached, confessed.

If things are to be so, then we must willingly give for the funding of the work of the Lord. We read in verses 70-73 that the chief of the fathers gave to the treasurer of the work and gave for priests’ garments. They willingly supported the work with their offerings, their finances. We call that in the instituted church the general budget. We have offerings for the general budget, for foreign missions, for mission assistants, for evangelism, for various works in the kingdom of God represented both by the local congregation and throughout the world, wherever God’s church is found. That is putting things in order.

The offerings for the causes of God’s church are the expression of gratitude. I’m here in the church to support that, to give as the Lord has prospered me, because I want the work of God to prosper in His church. Those offerings tell of the direction of our life. They reflect the love of our heart. They tell people where we are at. If you want to know where a person is at, find out about how he uses his money and what comes first. That will tell you where he is at. You say, “Oh, no. That won’t tell where I’m at. I’m in the pew every Sunday morning and evening.” No, this will tell you where you are at—what comes first in your checkbook. That will tell the direction of your life. Are you tight-fisted to the kingdom of God and open-handed to your own desires? Then you need to put things in order in the kingdom of God. You need, with me, to budget your money – first the church, first the kingdom of Christ, first the poor—not first CDs,

not first clothes, not first hair, not first boats, not first ourselves, not first that a young family have this big house. That should not be the goal. The goal is the church.

The church is the Lord's house. It is God's cause. We love her, and with Nehemiah we desire that things be in good order, that God may be glorified.

Let us pray.

Father, we again thank Thee for Thy Word. We pray that it may enter into our hearts with joy and conviction. In Jesus' name do we pray, Amen.