

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

May 6, 2012

When I Heard, I Wept and Prayed

No. 3618

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

Today we are going to begin a series on the Old Testament book of the Bible called Nehemiah. The theme of this book of Holy Scripture is given in the second chapter, verse 10. There we read, “When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.” The man Nehemiah is presented on the pages of Holy Scripture as a man who sought the welfare of God’s people and church, a man who was committed to God’s cause, God’s people, God’s church on earth, and who lived seeking their welfare. Therefore he is given for our example, our encouragement, and our admonition.

Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in the year 445 BC and was part of the end of the Old Testament days after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Captivity, when the glories of David and Solomon and of the world-power that the Jews had once been were long in the past, and God’s covenant people were accounted the offscouring, the ragtag group in Palestine. God’s people were characterized by weariness, by loss of hope, and by many inroads of sin among them.

God now raises up Nehemiah. His name means “the Lord comforts.” He is the instrument to promote the welfare of God’s people, to put things back into God-honoring order, to lead the people of God, and to establish them in the hope of Jesus Christ. Nehemiah was a man whom God calls from a palace. He was cupbearer to the king of Persia. He was in a position of luxury, opulence, renown, and earthly splendor. He had prestige and he was trusted. Upon him came the burden of the cause of God and God’s people.

Nehemiah was no prophet, though he spoke the word of God forthrightly, firmly, and in holy passion. Nehemiah was no priest, though he lived his life in the presence of God, was devoted to God’s church, and lived his life in prayer. Nehemiah was no king, though he had courage, and God used him to inspire His people to do good.

Nehemiah was unknown in the world of his day. His contemporaries were Demosthenes and Plato. Nehemiah is not known in the records of history. He was a man who never wore a crown, never conquered a country, and never developed a philosophy. Yet, by the grace of God, as a fruit of the redeeming grace of God in Christ, he served God in his generation. He sought the things of God and the honor of God. He was a great instrument of God for the good of the church.

So, why do I choose this book of Nehemiah? For one reason: commitment. That is so sorely and desperately needed—spiritual commitment to God’s cause, to the church, to God’s name, to God’s people, to God’s honor. Nehemiah represents commitment to God’s cause and truth and church and people.

Nehemiah was a Jew of the dispersion. He was the cupbearer to the king of Persia, Artaxerxes. Therefore Nehemiah lived in Shushan the palace. He had a very prestigious position. We read in Nehemiah 1:2 that Hanani, one of his brothers (perhaps Nehemiah’s physical brother), came with certain men of Judah. Nehemiah asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, what was left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. The answer given was most distressing. We read, “And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity [and he is referring there to the captivity of the people of God—that group who had returned to Jerusalem] there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire” (v. 3). The report was that great shame hung over the people of God – poverty, oppression, lack of unity, and a failure to put things in proper order. The walls were not rebuilt. The doors and the gates of the walls were not hung. Everything was strewn about in rubble, and Jerusalem was a picture of reproach and devastation.

All of this had had its effect upon the soul of the people of God. And the report of it now had a most powerful effect also upon Nehemiah. We read, “And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven” (v. 4).

Now picture that. The picture is not this: a question is asked, “Well, how are things back in the old country where we grew up? How are things back there in the church?” And the answer: “Oh, not good at all. No preaching. No Sabbath observance. Toleration of all types of ungodliness. Things are in a spiritual shambles.” And then the response was not this: “Oh, too bad. Oh, well. Back to my life. I have a meeting at 2:00 on the schedule of the royal calendar for the year. Then, at 3:30 there’s going to be a garden party in the royal gardens. Then, tonight, my friends and I are having dinner on the Tigris River near the hanging gardens.” That was *not* Nehemiah’s response. Nor was Nehemiah’s response, when he heard the devastating news of God’s church, that he pulled up the robes of self-righteousness and said, “Oh, those moral lepers! I’ll get on the phone and I’ll talk forty minutes with my friend about the liberalism in the church.” No, that was not the response.

The response was that the man was shattered. He wept. He fasted. He prayed. The love of his heart, the hope of his life, was in great need. If you do not love the church, if you do not love the people of God, and then you hear distressing news about the church, well, you will either shrug your shoulders and go back to your life, or you will arise up and say, “Shame on them!”

Let us pause. Nehemiah was not asking for news as a disinterested spectator. He was not looking for something to gossip about over the coffee table. Deep veins of love for God’s church and people had been deposited in his heart by grace.

Why was that news so devastating to Nehemiah, the news that Jerusalem was in shambles and the walls were not built? Was it that he was a patriot, a fifth-columnist in Persia? Was he a zealot for Judah's national honor? The answer is, No. The answer is found in what the walls of Jerusalem represented and in what the distressed people in Jerusalem represented. The walls of Jerusalem are very significant. We read, for instance, in Psalm 48: "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion...walk about Zion...tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces" (vv. 2, 12, 13). Or we read in Isaiah 26, "In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks" (v. 1). The walls represented the safety of God's people. The walls represented that which kept back the vicious hatred of those who sought their destruction. They represented her order. They revealed that all was in place, that inside these walls the people were organized as the saints of God upon the earth, that they were cared for. The walls represented the things of salvation, the things that God had unfolded to them, their spiritual defense. God's people were the ones who were given the truths of God's word.

Today those walls represent the establishment and the growth of the church of Jesus Christ. They represent the things of salvation. They represent those things that God has given to defend us from the inroads of sin and those things that God has given us to build up the church in the true and holy faith. They represent the truth of God's Word, specifically the Reformed, biblical truth summed and confessed by faithful creeds. These are the stones, these are the walls of the church. They represent the marks of the church: the preaching of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of loving Christian discipline. They represent the communion of saints. They represent prayer and Bible study and church life. They represent well-ordered Christian families.

How are the walls of Zion today? Look about. The walls are broken down around God's church in Zion.

There is the denial of Holy Scripture—denial of the inspiration by the theories of evolution taking over in the church. There is the abandoning of expository preaching. Instead of expository preaching from many a pulpit there is the "cheer-up and smile" message. There is the "happy-clappy" service. There is no longer a reverence for the living and the lovely God. There is minimal church attendance. There is the cancellation of Sunday evening services. There is the desire that religion be what suits me, and the desire to merge with this world.

What about ourselves? Is there within you a spirit of apathy and detachment concerning the well-being of God's glorious church? Do your children see that you are burdened in love for the cause of God on earth? Do you have commitment? Do you have compassion for the needy in the church? What is the motivating force of your life? Are the bricks of God's truth being formed up as walls in your heart? Or are the truths of God like a brickyard after an explosion – everything scattered around? There is no structure in your mind. You do not care about the truths of God's Word except, perhaps, occasionally to pick up a brick of God's truth and fling it at someone.

Nehemiah was burdened. He was burdened because he wanted the walls of truth and godliness to be built up around God's church. So it drove him to his knees.

In the rest of the first chapter we read of Nehemiah's passionate prayer. There are things that stand out in this prayer. It was steeped in Scripture. Nehemiah drew from Moses and from Solomon and from David and from Daniel and from Ezra. He shows that his prayer is formed out of an intimate knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. Oh, how applicable to today! Let us understand that prayer must not be rote repetition. The language and the attitude and the reverence of prayer must all flow from acquaintance with the Word of God.

Nehemiah's prayer, if you would read it, will be found to be intense and sincere. Nehemiah was committed to prayer. He went on persistently for three months, praying to God concerning this need.

Let us look very briefly at a few elements of his prayer.

First of all, in his prayer Nehemiah looked up to God in dependence (vv. 5, 6). "I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible [that is, majestic] God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant." He is praying out of a new principle, the new principle of grace. He is humbled before God. To him God was and is great. He is the God of covenant mercy. And Nehemiah said, "I am utterly dependent upon Thee."

Second, in his prayer Nehemiah only looked up to God in dependence, but he looked up to God also in repentance (vv. 6, 7): "...and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses." He made no attempt at excuses. He made no clever attempt to distance himself. He did not say, "Well, Lord, you really know that others are responsible for the state of the affairs of the church. I wasn't there. I can hardly be included. I'm not guilty." No, he reviewed what had happened to his fathers and he understood that there was only one reason for it: sin. They had departed from the living God. And then he confessed: "I'm just the same. I'm their offspring. Of myself I am no different. I am the same apostate sinner who, by nature, goes a-whoring from God." And he focused there upon their sin of omission. "We have dealt corruptly against Thee, we have not kept Thy commandments. It is not only in what we *did* that we have offended Thee, O God, but in what we *failed to do*. Here is our failure. It is our lack. It is what we have not done."

Then his prayer looked back in gratitude to God, to encourage himself concerning the future. He said (v. 8), "Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, [and then he brings up God's promise to a repentant people]."

Nehemiah then, when he heard the news of the walls of Jerusalem still in ruins and the spiritual shambles of the people of God, turned to God in a prayer of dependence, of repentance, and of *gratitude* to God who would be faithful to His promises.

This is very important for us today. Let us pause and consider some lessons that we can learn.

First of all, this lesson. Behold the direction of Nehemiah's life. What was the motivating force? And what is the motivating force in your life? What are you really concerned about? What do you want to see prosper? You would not need to ask Nehemiah. It is very plain that the church of Jesus Christ held the center of his heart. God's cause, God's people, God's honor, God's Christ, the well-being of the cause of God on earth, and the well-being of those who confessed that cause—that was the center of this man's life. Is it yours? Is it mine?

Nehemiah, remember, was the king's cupbearer. That means that he had climbed the ladder of success. Cupbearer to a king? That was recognized dignity. He wore fancy clothes. He was next in rank to princes. He had influence in the court. In today's terms, he had an office on the 92nd floor of the Standard Oil building. His name was on the door. He was a face and a force to be reckoned with. He had a social life that was the envy of many. He had friends in high places. He was a man of gifts and abilities. He was a man of force of character. He was driven around by a chauffeur.

But his heart was not set on those things. His life was not wrapped up in those things that men count dear and important. His love was directed elsewhere. It was upon the things of God and of His Christ. It was upon the things of the church and His people. It was toward those things that his heart and his life moved. This is what mattered to him. Did Zion prosper? Were the walls going up? Did the people of God live in unity, truth, and holiness? In a day of woe, you could not cheer Nehemiah up if you brought him the latest court gossip or the stock prices or told him that the oil futures had doubled. This would not be his encouragement. But you would have to speak to him about the church and the affairs of the church.

So, the question is: What is the direction of your life? What counts for you? Home, finance, business, things, pleasure, self? Or the house of God? Do you involve yourself in the church? Do you shoulder your responsibility? Do you value membership in a Bible-believing, true church? Do you use your talents to build up the walls of faith and truth? Or are earthly ambitions, wealth, and fame the motivating force of your heart? Or is it the things of Jesus Christ that moves you?

Young people, let me ask you: Where are you headed? To what have you made your commitment, the commitment of your heart? Towards yourself, pleasure, things, drink, sex? Toward finding men and women of the world who are exciting? Are you afraid of being considered narrow-minded as a follower of Jesus Christ? Do you hang on by a thread to the church? Throw in your heart to the only cause that is glorious, the only cause that matters – the cause of God's church and truth on the earth.

Then the second lesson is this. Behold this man's natural identity with God's people. Nehemiah thought corporately. Or you can put it this way: Nehemiah thought covenantally. He did not think independently. This is the vital lesson that is needed today concerning the church of Jesus Christ. We must not think independently. Nehemiah said, "Both I and my fathers have sinned. Hear the prayer of thy servants."

We must not think this way, "Well, what are those guys doing in the church over there? What are those guys doing as elders and deacons? What are the other people

doing? What did the church do for *me* lately? The problem is this and this. Well, if those problems weren't there, then I would be a part of it." Nehemiah did not think that way. He knew the covenant union of God's people. When he heard about the church, he thought this way: "I'm part of the body of Jesus Christ. When the body suffers, I suffer. When the body rejoices, I rejoice." We live in a world of individualism: Me, me! But that is not the way it must be in the church of Jesus Christ. It is not Me. It is not My! But it is We and it is Our. Those guys, those elders, those deacons, those other people in the church are *Us*. We must be united as the body of the Lord in the truth.

Finally, behold the God in whom Nehemiah believed. Nehemiah's God, as you read the first chapter of Nehemiah, was not a "wanna-be" God—that is, if only you will let Him be God. Nehemiah's God was the great and the universal sovereign, the God of heaven. Nehemiah's God was totally reliable. He kept covenant and mercy. Nehemiah's God was unutterably holy. He had no fellowship with sin. Nehemiah's God was compassionate and merciful to bring His people back even though they did not deserve it. Nehemiah's God was glorious in power. He had a strong hand to accomplish His will. Nehemiah's God was intimately near to him. Nehemiah stood in the presence of God. There is the secret of the man! There is the secret of Nehemiah. It is really no secret. It is found in his God. Nehemiah loved and lived for the living God. And because he loved and lived for the living God, the cause of God lay claim to his being and to his soul and to his heart. He sought the things of God's kingdom.

Is that what lays claim to your heart?

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word. Bless us as we begin this series of studies on the book of Nehemiah. May it be a great blessing to us. In Jesus' name do we pray, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

May 13, 2012

So I Prayed and Said...

No. 3619

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

It is the briefest prayer recorded on the pages of Holy Scripture, with the possible exception of the apostle Peter's prayer while he was sinking through the waves of the Sea of Galilee and cried out, "Lord, save me!" The prayer to which I am referring lasted as long as the time between the question of an earthly king and the response of his subject, perhaps one or two seconds. The king never noticed it. He did not know the act of worship to the God of heaven that had just flashed before him. But God took notice of it.

The prayer might not have been spoken in words. There might not have been time for address, "Our Father, who art in heaven"; and there might not have been the word "Amen." In fact, it might have been only a groan of the heart: "Lord, help me!" But it was a beautiful prayer. It was a powerful prayer. It was a complete prayer. It was prayer at its finest moment: in the words of the psalmist, "Lord, all my desire is before Thee. I lift up my eye to Thee."

I am referring to the prayer of Nehemiah in chapter 2, recorded in verses 1-10, when the king of Persia said unto Nehemiah his cupbearer: "For what do you make a request?" And we read: "So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said unto the king...." The king asked a question. Nehemiah prayed, and said! A brief prayer in which all of Nehemiah's desire went before the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Do you live in prayer that way? I am not asking if you have formal moments of prayer at the table. You should. You must. But do you have this type of prayer, while people are before you, while you are under great stress? Do you live in prayer without ceasing? No type of prayer is more important. This is living, this is walking in prayer. This is covenant fellowship with God.

We say, "Don't rely on your own strength. Go to God!" What does that mean? Right here is the answer. It is in Nehemiah's brief prayer. Between the question of a king and his response as a subject, Nehemiah prayed.

Nehemiah, we saw last week, was the man who is upon the pages of Scripture as our example of a believing commitment to the cause of God on earth, the cause of God's church. Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer in Persia. He received the distressing news that the walls of Jerusalem were still in shambles. In fact, the people spiritually were in shambles. Nehemiah comes upon the pages of Scripture in order that we might see a man who came to seek the welfare of the children of Israel, a man who will leave his position for a time as

cupbearer to a king in order to journey to a ragtag, desolate group of people in Palestine and guide them in the building of the walls.

In the first chapter of Nehemiah we learned that Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, came to Nehemiah to tell him of the distressing condition of the people of God who had returned from the Babylonian captivity, and of how the walls of Jerusalem had not yet been built. We saw there the great distress of Nehemiah, how he wept when he heard that and how he prayed to God a prayer of intense confession and supplication.

Now, in chapter 2 of Nehemiah, we see that a period of time (three to four months) has elapsed, during which time Nehemiah had continued his prayer. It becomes plain that during that time Nehemiah begins to plan to go to Jerusalem in order to give his hand to the rebuilding of the walls. Yet, for 90-120 days he remains in his task before the king, Artaxerxes. He waits to bring his request to the king.

We might ask, "Why did he wait? Why didn't he say immediately to the king, 'I have to go to Palestine. I must go to Jerusalem and see that these walls are built. This is upon my heart'?" He waited. Why? Perhaps he sought a proper occasion that did not immediately present itself. We should remember that one could not simply barge in on a king and blurt out a request. God had placed Nehemiah under authority, and he had a calling to exercise prudence before this king.

But Nehemiah is waiting especially upon the Lord, to give him the opportunity to bring his request to the king. This is very instructive. This is very striking. A word about the call to wait. That is always a part of the Lord's call, you know, to wait upon the Lord. Waiting is not wasted time for the child of God. It is necessary time. It is crucial time. Nehemiah needed to spend time in prayer, to be strengthened, to be weaned from his own impetuosity, and to be taught dependence. That is how God will lead you. Perhaps there is something upon your heart. You want to rush in. God says, "Slow down. Wait upon Me. Learn to wait upon Me."

The opportunity was brought by God to Nehemiah. It came this way. We read in chapter 2, verse 1 that he was performing his duties of pouring out wine before the king of Persia. Evidently the queen also was sitting beside the king. Nehemiah was attempting to perform his labors as a cupbearer to the great king and queen in as unobtrusive a way as possible—to act as if he was not even there. That was a good cupbearer. He was not even noticed. But the king began to notice that Nehemiah was very sad. We read, "Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence. Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart."

Nehemiah, though he went about his duties, nevertheless could not hide the burden of his soul. He could not endure that God's city—the city of God, Zion, the cause of God—was a ruinous heap. This cause had not been off his mind for four months. Jerusalem was painted on his spiritual eyeballs. We read in verse 1 that Nehemiah acknowledges, too, that when the king asked him the question about the sorrow of his heart, he was sore afraid. Literally, a terrible fear came over him.

Why was that? The answer was not that Nehemiah was a man who was prone to be scared easily. We will be seeing that the very opposite is the case. But more to the point would be this, that it is the normal spiritual reaction of a child of God who sees himself come to the place that he has prayed about, the place where he must now act and do, that fear comes upon him. Let me use this illustration. You have prayed to be parents. Now the baby that you prayed for is given to you and that little child is in your arms. Oh, what joy. But did it not make you tremble as the responsibility from God came upon you? Or you have been called to office in the church. You have been appointed to be an elder or deacon. When that finally falls upon you, there is the sense of responsibility. Did it not cause you to tremble in your heart? Or you have asked for an opportunity to witness, you have prayed that you might witness to this person, and now this person has given you the opportunity under the providence of God. He has asked you a question about your faith, about Jesus. Does not a certain fear fall upon you? So Nehemiah's being afraid is understandable.

Nehemiah answered the king: "Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchers, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?" Because it so lived upon his heart, he was able to tell the king the reason for his sadness in straightforward terms. Nehemiah always used straightforward terms. "King, the cause and place that God has given me to love is a reproach. And because it is suffering, I suffer with it—because my heart is identified with the cause of God."

The king interpreted Nehemiah's response correctly as having something more behind it, something behind it that he was going to ask for—that Nehemiah had a remedy in mind. So the king said, "For what dost thou make request?"

Now the moment has come, the moment for which Nehemiah had been waiting. The opportunity has arisen for him to speak of what was the inmost desire of his heart, and we read, "So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said unto the king..." He does not mean that he absented himself to go into a closet, fold his hands, and spend five minutes with the Lord. Rather, it was a very short prayer. The king did not notice it. There was barely a pause. There was no hesitation in the answer that he gave to the king. The king asked the question, "For what do you ask?" So I prayed to the Lord and I said. In that one or two-second interval Nehemiah sought God's presence for strength, for wisdom, for guidance to answer the king. In one flash of a second he brought his entire heart and all of his desires to God. He confessed eloquently his dependence upon God. He acknowledged wonderfully God as God alone, who must be worshiped. He laid praise upon the altar and he committed his entire way and word to the Lord. It was beautiful. It was prayer at its finest, I say. It was the fruit of the cross of Jesus Christ that has given us instant access into the grace wherein we stand.

Children, is prayer only when we fold our hands? Is prayer only when we bow our heads? Is prayer uttered only in sentences with subject, verb, and object, and periods? Prayer is seeking God. Through faith it translates our souls into the presence of God. Can I not deliver this radio message and at the same time pray? Can you not pray as you listen and not lose the train of thought of my message to you at this time? Can you not pray as your friend is speaking to you, as your wife asks you a question? Your wife asks you a question – you are about to get into a

squabble. Can you not pray before you answer her? Can you not pray as the brother speaks? Can you not pray before you speak?

Nehemiah, of course, is not alone in this type of prayer. I referred at the beginning to Simon Peter as he sank into the waves on the Sea of Galilee. He prayed, "Lord, help me." But also Daniel's three friends stood before a king—the king of Babylon—a king who was not sympathetic to them, a king who was furious, a king who was threatening them. And we read that they answered this way, "The God before whom we stand is able to deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace." Daniel's three friends prayed all the way to the king, they prayed *before* the king, they prayed all the way to the furnace. And that does not mean that they asked to stop for a few moments to be alone in prayer. This is the spirit of prayer. Do you know this kind of prayer?

Nehemiah, of course, could have become flustered. Who would not be? His flesh would have his tongue tied. He might have begun to hem and haw: "Well, ah, well, king, you ask me about why I'm sad...and what I would like. Well, it's like, uh..." No. He prayed and he said.

You can do that. You say to me, "Well, in my line of work I need to be sharp. The boss wants the answer right now. My mind's got to be on the business. There are dollars involved." You say to me, "Well, my teenager is walking out the door wearing what I told her yesterday she may not wear. I don't have time for prayer at this point. I'm in a place of great stress. I need to say something right now. It's no time for prayer!"

Beloved, I believe that those moments come and, yes, that you must say something to your daughter. You have to be responsible to your boss, yes. Your mind has got to be on the particulars at that very moment. You are under stress. Your mind has to be focused. You are placed in stressful situations. But you have not been placed in the stress of being a cupbearer to the king of Persia. So careful must be one's words, one's tone, one's appearance before a king. Yet, here is a man who stood before the king of Persia and prayed to the God of heaven, and said.... That is prayer. You answer your boss. You look up from your desk as he walks in with the question. You look up and into the eyes of God in faith. And then you speak. Your daughter is on the way out of the house wearing those clothes. Yes, you say something...after you see God and say, "Lord, now help me." That is prayer. Prayer is living in the presence of God.

As Nehemiah's prayer was in an instant, so also God's answer and the gift of grace to him were in an instant. We read in Isaiah 65:24, "And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear." There was sufficient grace given to Nehemiah, first of all, in that he was able to speak and to describe to the king the needs of Jerusalem and what he desired to do. Jesus has promised that the Holy Spirit will be given to you and you shall be able to say what is needed to be said. God gave Nehemiah the strength to do that. There were things that had been upon his heart. He had thought over how he would make his request many times. He had chosen the words. But when the moment came, it was God who supplied grace to speak. It was God who gave him to stand before the king for God's sake and, without shame, speak of Zion's need. "If it please the king," we read, "and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of

my fathers' sepulchers, that I may build it." I want to build the walls of Zion. I am one who is devoted to the cause of the living God on earth. My devotion is to Him and to His cause. In the words of the apostle Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ." It was sufficient grace to answer the king's question.

The king went on. "For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return?" Nehemiah was prepared for the question. So, "If it please the king to send me, I will set him a time."

It was sufficient grace to plan for what he needed to have (v. 7): "Moreover I said unto the king, ... let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah." He asked for written authorization of his mission—authorization from the king to grant him passage through the various checkpoints and border crossings of the kingdoms in order that he might come to Jerusalem. He planned the necessary resources. He made his list of building materials for the job. He estimated the time the project would take. He asked for the official documents authorizing his activities.

Why is all of that included here, do you think? Was not the emphasis to be made that he was not to do any thinking, just pray and then speak? No. All of those details Nehemiah had thought out. This teaches us that prayer produces in us responsibility and care and prudence. It was not (this is not a good phrase—Nehemiah was not one who would advocate the phrase I am about to say), Nehemiah did not 'let-go and let-God.' It was not, "Well, the Lord will provide, so throw away the spreadsheet." No, it was all God's work and Nehemiah knew it. So Nehemiah set himself to be a diligent and faithful servant. He knew that plans needed to be made. He knew that if God's grace brought him to the point that the king was going to give permission, then he had to be ready to answer the specific questions the king would ask. How long? What kind of materials? Why are you going to do this? So Nehemiah lived in dependence and prayed to God, and he did his homework. He was ready. He was diligent. But he depended upon God.

Nehemiah, you see, had a profound conviction about God's church and the cause of God. He believed that he must spend himself in that cause. He believed that everything in that cause was due to God's arrangement. Those two things go together. He was careful in his planning. He was diligent in his responsibilities. But he knew *his* plans could accomplish nothing. Unless the Lord build the house, we read, they labor in vain that build it. Unless the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. It is God's grace that brings good to the church. And we are to depend upon God. So, pray! The sufficiency is not of us, but of God.

Do you understand these things—as an elder? As a father and a husband? As a parent? All you who love the Lord, all you who would, by His grace, say, "I seek His honor to do His will. I desire His cause to prosper"—do you know that you are utterly dependent upon His sufficient grace?

Once again, there are some practical lessons for us to learn from all of this.

First of all, let us live in the spirit of prayer. If God's eye is upon you every moment of every day, an eye of pity, compassion, love, and faithfulness, then ought not the eye of *your* heart be

directed constantly to Him? Ought not little prayers, glances heavenward, become the blessed habit of your life? How much distress, lack of spiritual composure, loss of enjoyment of His all-sufficient presence, how much of that is not ours because, in moments of sorrow, trial, distress, and stress we look in and not out? We look down and not up. You may pray—always, anywhere. While we oppose all the irreverence, the flippancy, and the blasphemy that is being brought into the prayer life of Christians, the error of irreverence must not keep us from the right of prayer. The way is open to you. In the business of every day, and under the obligations of every day, and under the stress of every day, you may pray. You may go immediately in your thoughts to God. That is not irreverent. You may pray as you walk. You may pray as you drive. You may pray as you entertain your friends. You may pray as you visit. You may pray all the day. You may cast on Him those cares that come back to you time after time—those tears, those burdens, those questions. You may constantly be casting them upon the Lord. He will sustain you. Go to Him!

Second, let us trust the gracious providence of God. Nehemiah saw the good hand of God upon him. He saw it all the way. He saw that God was working. He saw what only faith could give him to see – the almighty hand of God controlling everything—not making him irresponsible, but giving him confidence and peace.

So, the king asked a question. And the subject prayed and said.

Let us pray that way, always. In a moment let our heart and our desire go to God. And let us live this way that we may see the good hand of God upon us.

Let us pray.

Father, bless this message to our hearts. Apply it to the walk of life that we have. Forgive us of our sins. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

May 20, 2012

Come, Let Us Build!

No. 3620

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

Come, and let us build. These were the words that Nehemiah used to address the people when he at last came among them from the king of Persia and he stood among them in the rubble of Jerusalem. “Come, and let us build.”

I pray that each one of us may hear that as the call of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to be busy in the work of His church and kingdom. Christ said, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her.” All the building of the glorious kingdom of our God is performed by His mighty hand of grace. But He is pleased to use us as His instruments and as His servants. We love His kingdom and everything connected with that kingdom. What a privilege it is to give ourselves to the only meaningful work on earth under the sun: the building of the glorious kingdom of God and His church.

Come, and let us build. I pray that we may hear that today as the irresistible call, the exciting call of the Lord to be busy, to busy ourselves in the things of His cause and kingdom, to build up the church by maintaining the truth of the Scriptures; by maintaining the Reformed, biblical creeds; by preaching the truth of the gospel; by being involved in the heartfelt evangelism and the spread of this glorious gospel. Build the walls by teaching the children of the church the Bible stories, for sure, but teach them also the blessed doctrines and the life of holiness and godliness. Let not the church fall into the ruins of indifference. Let not the church be overtaken by the weeds of heresy. Let not the church be torn down by fighting and divisions. But, come, let us build.

And build up the walls of your own spiritual life. In II Corinthians 7:1 we read, “Dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” Is your spiritual life a shambles, like a broken-down wall, strewn with rocks of good intentions never put back in place; gaping holes of indifference, that allow the world inside your heart and allow things in your life that cause others to reproach your God? Come, let us build up in the true faith in Jesus Christ.

Build up your family. Build up your marriage. Teach your children. Equip them. Build your marriage solidly upon the Word of God, love for God, and sacrifice one for another. The great work of the kingdom of God: Come, let us build.

And I pray that the response will be, “Let us rise up and build.” This was the response of God’s people to Nehemiah’s call.

I pray that sacrifices of time, energy, money will be considered a light thing for us. I pray that God will give us leaders, spiritually, to inspire us—elders and deacons to lead us. And I pray that, as we will also face opposition and discouragement in this building, even as Nehemiah faced opposition and discouragement aplenty, we may not draw back but say, as Nehemiah said: “The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build” (v. 20).

We come today to the third message on the life of Nehemiah. It is taken from Nehemiah 2:11-20. After a wearying journey of many months, Nehemiah sees Jerusalem for the first time in his life. Nehemiah, you will remember, was the king’s cupbearer in Persia. He had received word of the devastation in which Jerusalem remained, and he had been told that the walls of Jerusalem had still not been rebuilt. He was a man who sought the welfare of the children of Israel. In his heart God had placed a strong purpose—that he would give himself for the cause of God.

He was overwhelmed, no doubt, when at last he arrived and saw for himself the city’s crumbled walls, charred gates, and devastation. From the Scriptures he knew what the city of God ought to be. Jerusalem (Psalm 122) is builded as a city that is compact together, where there would be thrones of judgment. Jerusalem, in its walls and in its houses and in its orderliness, was a picture of the cause of God upon the earth. And he saw her, now, suffering—suffering under the effects of sin, under the effects of the judgments of God upon forsaking God. He has arrived within Jerusalem and sees this devastation firsthand.

There are two facts revealed in his arrival that are quite significant. First of all, as we read the passage in Nehemiah chapter 2 we see that there was no fanfare when he arrived. There was no welcome party. Although rumors had been circulated by the Jews’ enemies, and even the enemies knew there was a man who was come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel (v. 10), yet the nobles and the princes and the priests of Jerusalem formed no welcome-line to Nehemiah. And Nehemiah himself approaches without any religious hoopla, no brass bands to drum up support, no boasts, no enlistment program, no inspirational address to help the people catch the vision. No, he arrives as the servant of God who is looking to God for his strength, to God for his wisdom, and to God for his direction. We read in verse 12, “Neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem.”

The second thing that we are told is that he took time to rest (v. 11): “So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.” This is exactly what Ezra did thirteen years before. He, too, came and rested. Physical rest was needed. The journey of months had taken its toll upon Nehemiah. And a great work stood before him. Therefore he sought to be refreshed. Tiredness robs us of perspective, multiplies our anxieties, and makes everything appear burdensome. So he rested.

It was after he had rested that Nehemiah performed a moonlight inspection of Jerusalem’s walls—one of the most dramatic scenes in the book of Nehemiah. We read: “And I arose in the night ... and I went out by night by the gate of the valley.” This inspection was done in the night out of secrecy that, to Nehemiah, was very important at that point. The rulers, men such as Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem (of whom we will learn more in the coming weeks), had

lobbied the king of Persia to have the work on the walls of Jerusalem cease by force. So Nehemiah wants to keep the enemies in the dark as long as possible concerning his intention and give them no opportunity to rally opposition before he can even start.

As for the Jews (the priests, the nobles, the rulers, and the working men), Nehemiah does not want a big display. He wants to avoid the question as to what his purpose was that he had in mind. So, with a select few whom he takes with him, in secret he goes forth to inspect the walls. It was a thorough inspection, out of the gate leading to the valley. Jerusalem was built on the top of cliffs. Stones had rolled down when the walls were destroyed. He uses the obscurity of the dung port (the sewage canal). He passes through the gate of the fountain of the king's pool, we read. Wherever he goes, it is a scene of devastation. The walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates were consumed with fire. Nebuchadnezzar and his soldiers had done a thorough job, a spiteful job, so that the beast, we read, upon which Nehemiah rode could not pick its way across the rubble. Nehemiah had to dismount and jump from rock to rock. Anything that could be used for defense had been pulverized. All the memorable structures displaying Zion's beauty had been marred by fire and crushed by sledgehammers. His assessment was that it was a ruinous heap. His assessment was that the work before him of restoring these walls and this city was daunting and demanding and hazardous. And humanly impossible.

This is very applicable to today. You love God's cause. You desire the good of God's cause. Well, you are to make an assessment. You must not be under any delusion. The walls of Jerusalem, as we have said, represent those things that must be in place if we are to enjoy our salvation – those things that must be steadfast if we are to prosper in our faith in Jesus Christ. The walls of the church are the preaching of the pure doctrines of Jesus Christ, a God-centered worship in the call to faith and repentance, and a holding fast to the word of life and truth. In our own individual lives, those walls are the knowledge of Holy Scripture, a life of prayer, a life of holiness, a life of repentance, the communion of saints, faithful marriages, loving families. These are the walls. When we pray, "Build up the walls of Zion," we are praying, "Lord, preserve all of these things in their place."

Now inspect the walls quietly. Walk around. Gain an understanding. Look at it. The church, today, in the world—how much rubble! How much has fallen apart! Is the worship of God as He requires it, or is the worship of the church that which suits men? The building blocks of the wall, the foundation stones, the Reformed and biblical creeds, are discarded. Emotion is mistaken for faith. Holiness is forsaken. The allowance of divorce for every cause and remarriage and Sabbath desecration and the tolerance of unholy lives—the church is always in danger of becoming rubble.

But look upon your own walls, your own spiritual lives. Do you have little interest in the gospel? Do you give way to doubt in the midst of your difficulties? What about how you come to church? Do you come to church with love for God and a desire to hear His Word? What about your personal walls? Inspect those personal walls of maintaining in your life those things that must be there if you are to prosper spiritually. What about your Sabbath observance? What about the purity of your life, sexually? What about your friendships? What about your

family? What about your marriage? Make an inspection. Certainly you must find that it is so easy for all of these things to fall down around us.

This was the word, now, of Nehemiah after he made his inspection: “Come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.” As he stood the next day before the people, that was a spiritually electrifying moment, a moment of true courage and true faith. I would hardly have blamed Nehemiah if, after his inspection, he had booked himself the next morning on the first camel train back to Persia. I could hardly blame him if he had said, “I can’t do this! There’s no sense in trying. This is a hopeless cause.” But instead of that, this servant of the Lord addresses the people with these words: “Come, and let us build.” He walked by faith. He saw the difficulties. He saw the opposition. He understood it better than any other man. The Jews had returned some seventy-five years earlier. For seventy-five years they had been looking at those strewn boulders that had formerly been the walls of Jerusalem. This was not going to be an easy thing to do. But Nehemiah is focused upon God. He saw God who is invisible. Against hope he believed in hope. He embraced the living God by faith. Nehemiah saw that the founder and builder of the city of Jerusalem, the church of God, is God!

And, in faith, he stepped forward in leadership. The next morning, instead of quietly exiting the city, he comes into the public eye with a direct and challenging word: “Come, and let us build.” We read, “Then I said unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.”

Notice two things in Nehemiah’s call, both of which things are crucial. First of all, he identified himself with the people. “Ye see the distress that *we* are in.” The man had just arrived a few days before. He does not say, “I see the distress *you* are in.” Oh, no. “That *we* are in. I am one with you.” Oh, the need for unity of heart in the Lord’s work. Not separation from the church’s woes. Not condescension toward those who are immersed in those woes. But true unity and compassion with the church of Jesus Christ.

Then note, secondly, that his call struck a deep spiritual nerve: “Let us build that we be no more a reproach.” And he means, not personally, but a reproach upon the name of God. He says that the big issue here is not our reputation and our comfort and our problems, but the shame that all of this is bringing upon the name of our God. For, you see, if nothing else would stir a child of God into action, that will, that must. The name of God is being reproached. We must do something! If the church has any spiritual life, that will get the church up and moving. What is it that is being said about God!? What is being said about God when church members act like the world? What is being said about God when church members, you and I, have no time for the Word of God? What is being said about God when the truth of God’s Word is compromised? What is being said about my God when a child of God acts and talks like the world? Here is the nerve of grace: That we be no more a shame to our God.

He encouraged the people. He encouraged them, first of all, by reminding them of what God had already done. We read in verse 18, “Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king’s words that he had spoken unto me.” He told them of the gracious work of God, of how he as a cupbearer to the king was given the opportunity to bring

Jerusalem's need before the king and of how the king had been favorable to all of his requests and had authorized that the work be done. That was no little thing. The work had the authorization of the king. So he encouraged them that the good hand of God was already upon them.

Second, he encouraged them in God. In two things about God, especially – His power and His omnipresence. “The hand of my God which was good upon me.” This God has a mighty hand, a hand that is present with us. And this God is a God of great power, great ability. He is with us.

We read, “And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.” The people were not disobedient. They answered the call of Nehemiah. By faith working within them, and livened by God's servant, they expressed a resolution to be devoted to the work of the Lord. In the same faith with which Israel went forward at the Red Sea when Moses said, “Go forward,” so also now the people of God go forward in faith.

Does this resolution work in your soul? God has called you to be active in your church, to work unto the church's good and edification. God has called you to be active in your family, in your marriage, in your life, to build up the walls, to be to His honor and to His glory. Now, let us go. Let us strengthen our hands in God and let us go forth unto this work dependent upon God.

There was going to be opposition. Nehemiah knew it. There was a troublesome trio. We are going to learn more about them in the coming weeks. There was a man called Sanballat, who was a political leader. Sanballat means “sin gives life.” He was a wicked man. There was a man called Tobiah. He was a religious leader. And there was Geshem, who was a merchant. He was a materialistic man. These three men were going to become the source of strong opposition. Opposition is always present in the building of God's kingdom. Wherever that kingdom is—in the church, in the home, in your own personal life—there will always be opposition. There will be verbal assaults. These three men laughed Nehemiah and the people to scorn and despised them. Then they began to impute evil motives to Nehemiah. “Will he rebel against the king?” they said. That was intended to make Nehemiah afraid.

Nehemiah, however, hardly paused in his work to answer their lies. We read in verse 20: “Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.” God will prosper us. Nehemiah exalts God, and he is not intimidated by their insinuations and their smear campaign. He believed that God would bless the project. And that is all that mattered to him. He instructed the workers to ignore the taunts of the enemies. Let them talk, we have work to do. And he showed them that he would not be bullied by them. “You do not have a portion, you don't have a place here, you don't have a right. The king has authorized me, as the governor now of Jerusalem, to proceed with this work. It does not matter what you say. We are going on in the work that God gave us.” And he went on in the work. He would not take the time to dillydally or to engage in discussion with those men or to quibble with those who were scorning and objecting to the work. It was time for commitment to

God's cause. It was time for exertion of ability. It was time for involvement. It was time for sacrifice. It was time for wholehearted devotion to the Lord and His church and His work.

And that is the time also in which you live. It is time for those who love God's church to say, "Come, and let us build." It is time for all those who love the kingdom of God in the church and in their own lives and in marriage and in the family and in Christian schools—it is time for you to say, "Let us arise and build. The God of heaven, He will prosper us. Therefore we his servants will arise and build."

Let us pray.

Father, we do thank Thee for Thy Word. We pray that it may be a blessing upon us in this day. Keep us faithful unto that glorious cause of Thy kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

May 27, 2012

The People Had a Mind to Work

No. 3621

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

Jerusalem was a city that was built upon mountains. When the walls of that city were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the walls were not pushed in but out. The stones, massive, weighing tons, rolled down into the valley below, digging furrows, so that, from the top one could look down upon a field strewn thick with boulders. Each one of these boulders had to be hauled up, cleaned, reshaped, and fitted back into the wall.

In Nehemiah 4:10, 11 we read, “The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall. And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease.”

It was a field of devastation. There were no cranes, no diesel engines, no construction companies. We do not read that any of the builders that Nehemiah employed in the building of the walls were masons. There might have been a few. But we read that they were priests and perfume makers and policemen and businessmen.

Further, there was a need for skill. The foundation had to be firm, the walls plumb. Sections of the wall needed to be joined and fit together, for if the wall was not connected, what good would it be? It required muscle, sweat, unity, cooperation, skill. It was a great work.

Nehemiah, you remember, came to Jerusalem after hearing that the walls of Jerusalem were yet in devastation. He has appeared among the people of God and issued the call: “Come, let us build.” And the people of God, by God’s grace, have now responded under Nehemiah’s firm leadership: “We will arise and build.” So they strengthened their hands in the God of heaven and said, “He will prosper us. Therefore we his servants will arise and build.”

Nehemiah 3, though one might be inclined to skip over it because it is filled with names that are hard to read, is nevertheless one of the most precious chapters in God’s Word. There you see the people of God of all ages, of all occupations, without contention, without pursuing separate interests, without bickering, side by side doing the work of the Lord. Why?

We read in Nehemiah 4:6, “The people had a mind to work.” The work of the Lord, by the grace of the Spirit, lay near to their heart. And God caused that work to be so dear that it crushed all of their self-interests. And, by the Spirit of God, in thankfulness, they started up and they builded, side by side, family by family, engaged in the great work of building the walls of Zion.

Do you build the wall of Zion, even over against your own house (Neh. 3:10)—your family, your children, your marriage, the walls of your own personal godliness, the walls of the church of which you are a member? Is the truth of God dear and precious to you? Is it evident in your life that the things of Christ and the things of the church and of the gospel lay claim to your heart—that you have a mind in you to work, to dedicate yourself to the great work of God in time, which is in the church of Jesus Christ? May the Scriptures, as we look into Nehemiah 3 today, so cause us to say, “Put my name down there. Record my name as one who built next to so-and-so, next to my brother. And the wall of Zion—that we were engaged in the great work of the Lord.”

Our theme is: The people had a mind to work.

I said that if you looked at Nehemiah 3, you might be tempted to brush over it. But you should read that chapter with the same reverence that you read Hebrews 11, the chapter on the heroes of faith. None of these men and women who are mentioned in Nehemiah 3 will you find in Hebrews 11. But the same faith that was present in the heroes of faith, those heroes of faith who wrought righteousness, obtained promises, and out of weakness were made strong—that same faith was living in the people mentioned in Nehemiah 3. This is God’s registry of builders. It is not a registry of those who tear down in opposition to Him, of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander (I Tim. 1:20), who have put away the faith. God has such a record of false teachers, you know, a registry of deserters, of those who have forsaken. But here in Nehemiah 3 we have a registry of faithful builders in the kingdom of God.

If we study this registry, we find out some very important truths.

First of all, we see that the building of the walls under the leadership of Nehemiah began with the example of the high priest, who set down clearly the priority. This is verse 1 of the chapter. The religious leaders, the high priests, were the ones who set the example, they led the way. They are the very first ones recorded to take up the work. The high priest and his brethren rose up. They got the ball rolling under the leadership of Nehemiah.

So let it be. Elders, deacons, and ministers are required to do more than just talk. Their life is to be their sermon.

And notice, not only were the priests the ones to show an example of setting spiritual things first in their life and of giving themselves wholly to the Lord, but they also set the priority. The high priest built the sheep gate. That is where the work of the wall began. And, if you read the chapter, you find that the work goes circular, all the way around, and it ends up back at that sheep gate. The sheep gate was the place where the animals of sacrifice entered the city. It was directly related to the temple, to the worship of God. It was the very heart of the worship of God. They began at the right place.

Note, second, the diversity of the builders. If you read Nehemiah 3 you will see that the builders came from eight different locations, some up to twenty miles away. Only fifty percent were residents. They came from Tekoa, from Gibeon. They were inhabitants of Zanoah, from Mizpah, from Bethzur, and from Keilah. They all had their own farms to till, their vineyards to

prune, and their workshops to run. They had no direct benefit themselves from the walls of Jerusalem. They did not say, “Yes, you have this function and this activity and this work of the church, but I’ve got my own things to do. I’m too busy for the church’s needs. I have important things. And, besides, what am I going to get out of it?” That was not the spirit of these men.

They were from every walk of life. There were goldsmiths, and apothecaries (that is, perfume-makers). There were merchants and rulers and even daughters (v. 12, a man had his daughters working with him laying brick). They did not say, “Well, what can I do? I’m not skilled. I’ve never seen a trowel in my life. My hands are soft and those bricks are rough. I’m a perfume-maker. I mix liquids in my laboratory. What am I going to do?” No, they said, “Now, as a perfume-maker, I’ll mix mud on the scaffold.” Or, “As a goldsmith, I will apply my skill in cutting to the reshaping of the stones.” Or, “As a daughter, I’ll go with my Dad and I will be engaged in this work.” What an example to us of wholehearted commitment as families to the cause of God.

Note with me, third, the selflessness of the builders. Merchants left their business. Farmers left their fields. The mind-set was one of self-abrogation. Self was not important. That comes out especially in the mention of the dung gate, if you read verse 14. All of the work, of course, was arduous. But some of them would offset that difficult work in the knowledge that they were building some very notable places—some places of high profile—the old gate through which Melchizedek entered, the wall of the pool of Siloah, the wall over against the sepulchers of David, the tower of the king’s house. But there were other places that did not have this high profile and were not glamorous. Someone had to build the wall over the dung gate—over the sewage canal. I can imagine the day when Nehemiah was handing out the contracts or assigning the portions of the wall that must be built by each family. He said, “Dung gate.” And we read that a man called Malchiah the son of Rechab, the ruler of part of Bethhaccerem—he built it, he stepped forward. It was a smelly work. It was unpopular. It had to be done for the glory of God. And he did it.

Note with me in the fourth place, the unity of the builders. They constantly are referred to this way: Next to them built.... What man here does not know, from experience in his daily occupation, how jealousy and personal ambition and envy can hamper, delay, and all but ruin his projects—when workers look cross-eyed at each other. But there was a unity among these Jews in which they took into account each other. They loved each other and they loved the cause.

Then, note the zeal of the builders. Not all were engaged in this work. We read in verse 5 that the nobles of Tekoa would not put their necks to the work of the Lord. They were proud, they were arrogant. They said, “Oh, this is beneath our dignity.” So it was not perfect. But, nevertheless, there were builders that had exceptional zeal. The Tekoites were mentioned as those who repaired not only one portion of the wall, but repaired more than one portion of the wall. They came, evidently, to Nehemiah, and said, “We’re done. Where else can we help? Who else can we help? We did our quota, but we’ve got strength. We can do more.”

Then, note finally the graciousness of God toward the builders. Some of the workers on the wall had a checkered past and some of them had a troublesome present. There was a man called Meremoth, the son of Urijah, the son of Koz (v. 4). His grandfather had been put out of the

priesthood for the sin of marrying a strange wife. His father had been restored. And now Meremoth, the grandson, is distinguishing himself. We read further of a man called Meshullam. He is engaged in the work. But it is his daughter who has married the son of Tobiah (and Tobiah is the enemy). His daughter, daughter-in-law to Tobiah, is reporting every word of Nehemiah to Tobiah and is trying to promote the work of Tobiah in stopping the construction of the wall. So here is a man whose family was not behind him. This was very troublesome to him. But he continued in the work. The sins of the fathers do not prevent God's grace from working in the present. And the troubles and sorrows of the present do not disqualify one from the work of the Lord.

What vital living lessons.

I trust that as we went over that brief review of the work of the Lord in the building of the walls, you were making much personal application – that the Holy Spirit was busy actively applying the Word. You do not just sit mindlessly under the Word of God, do you? You hear God's Word for application, do you not? You understand that Nehemiah 3 is not just the record of the past, but that this Scripture is the Word of the present, always the Word of the present. Do not say, "Oh, what that would have been like to see that and to talk to those guys!" You, child of God, are there. How are you building?

The lessons are, first of all, the forgetfulness of self in the presence of a passion for the accomplishment of the great work of God—the great work of God is the cause of His church. The gospel, the covenant, evangelism, building up, sending forth the Word of God—the great work that comes to us, children of God, is a weight that must crush self.

Beloved, when the needs of the wall are shown to you, the needs of God's people, then inside of us must shrink "Me," "My," and "Mine." Self must shrivel up in the presence of the great work of God's kingdom of His dear Son.

Self-denial. Jesus said, "If any man come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." If your honor, if your way, if your will, if your pleasure is the most important thing to you, do not count on being used of God for any good purpose in the building of His kingdom. Do not count on being involved in anything that really matters. You want to build up your marriage—forget about yourself. You must have the great vision of the Lamb of God and His wife the church at the table of communion in heaven.

You want, young people, to work this year? You want, young people, to have a time of fellowship? Do not sit in the discussion thinking about how you come off and what other people think about you and that what you said sounds dumb. Oh, but you have to see, if you are going to be engaged in spiritual work with each other, the great wonderful work of the Lord. Oh, for the Holy Spirit to give us a great vision of the work of the Lord.

Note, second, the lesson of the unity of the workers. Building in the kingdom of Christ is not like building the tower of Babel. It is the confusion of tongues there –speaking past, through,

and about each other – gaining ascendancy over the other. But the building of God’s church on every level is to be characterized by unity—a peace—from seeking each one to do his own part, to the eye of the joining of the wall. The strength of Nehemiah’s day was unity. It would have been doomed if the ranks were filled with rancor, bitterness, accusation, and suspicion.

Division is the most tragic evil in the life of the church. The wall must be joined if it is to be a wall. Apart from unity, there is no success in building. Too often we are busy building. We are busy building our piece of the wall. We want to build our piece of the wall thick and high and better because those other people in the church are just not as faithful as we are. We say, “My kids, my spiritual life, my church in this denomination is really the backbone of the church.” We look askance at the builders united in the confessions with us—others who are different from us. We do not see the need that the wall be joined.

What good is a strong section of the wall—high and thick—if it is not joined to the other sections of the wall? The devil passes through the gaps in the wall and he laughs and pushes it down from inside. You are not a liberal if you seek the unity of the builders of the church in the truth of God. No church can be independent. No church can be conservative, biblical, and faithful by itself. A believer is not strong standing alone. Young people, you are not strong if you stand alone. You must be joined to the church in truth.

Note with me the lesson of the sobriety of the builders. They did not perform shoddy work. They did good work. It was not shoddy work in catechism. It was not shoddy work in their spiritual life. There was a sobriety, there was a care about the work.

What a glorious truth! And what a glorious thing it is to be involved in the building of the kingdom of God. Not that we want to have a tower named after us. But we desire that God use our weak and sinful labors to accomplish a glorious purpose in the building of Jerusalem, His church. We desire to be faithful servants.

Therefore the Word of God comes to us today to be busy at our place on the wall; busy in our home teaching our children; busy serving our wife, serving our husband, leading our children, spending time with them; busy in the church, faithful as elders and deacons, faithful as church members; faithful in the Christian school; faithful at work, doing all that the Master has set before us, witnessing of the gospel. All these mighty works—wherever God has placed you, be it at David’s gate or at the dung gate; be it at the sheep gate or at the old gate; be you a mother, a husband, a wife, a parent, a believer, a pastor, a young person, a child, an elder or a deacon—in the church, we stand in one faith next to each other. I next to you. And our labor is not in vain in the Lord.

Let us hear the leader, Jesus Christ, who has come among us: “Come, let us build. Deny yourself. Stand in the unity of the truth. Desire skill and wisdom in the Word of the Lord.” The triumph is sure. The city of God will be built. Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem, by God’s grace alone, will descend out of heaven. Come, then, let us build. And may God Himself give to us a mind to work.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word. And we pray for its blessing now today upon our hearts and upon our souls. We pray that we may be united and stand united in humility and in faithfulness to Thee and to Thy glorious cause, that the truth of Thy Word may be above all things precious to us. And that, in the face of that truth, we may truly humble ourselves and be busy building for Thy honor and for Thy glory. In Jesus' name do we ask and pray these things, Amen.