Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Nehemiah

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Introduction

Nehemiah as a necessary link in the history of God's dealings towards Jerusalem

The Book of Nehemiah will require but few remarks; but it is important to establish its import. It is a necessary link in the history of God's dealings, in the recital of His patience and loving-kindness towards Jerusalem, which He had chosen.

In Ezra we have seen the temple rebuilt and the authority of the law re-established among the people, who are again separated from the Gentiles, and set apart for God.

In Nehemiah we witness the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and the restoration of what may be termed the civil condition of the people, but under circumstances that definitely prove their subjection to the Gentiles.

Chapter 1

Nehemiah's heart and that of the Gentile king

Through grace, faith had set up the altar, and the Gentiles had had nothing to do with it, except by voluntary service; but when the city is to be rebuilt, it is the governor appointed by the Gentiles who holds the prominent place, God having touched the heart of these Gentiles and disposed them to favour His people. We see in Nehemiah himself a heart touched with the affliction of his people, a precious token of the grace of God; and He who had produced this feeling disposed the king's heart to grant Nehemiah all he desired for the good of the people and of Jerusalem. We see also in Nehemiah a heart that habitually turned to God, that sought its strength in Him, and thus surmounted the greatest obstacles.

Chapters 2 to 6

Nehemiah's perseverance and faithfulness

The time in which Nehemiah laboured for the good of his people was not one of those brilliant phases which, if faith be there, awaken even the energy of man, imparting to it its own lustre. It was a period which required the perseverance that springs from a deep interest in the people of God, because they are His people; a perseverance which, for this very reason, pursues its object in spite of the contempt excited by the work, apparently so insignificant, but which is not the less the work of God; and which pursues it in spite of the hatred and opposition of enemies, and the faintheartedness of fellow-labourers (Neh. 4:8-11); a perseverance which, giving itself up entirely to the work, baffles all the intrigues of the enemy, and avoids every snare, God taking care of those who trust in Him.

It is also a beautiful feature in Nehemiah's character, that in spite of his high office he had all the detail of service so much at heart, and all that concerned the upright walk of God's people.

In the midst, however, of all this faithfulness, we perceive the influence of the Gentile power controlling the whole state of things. Nehemiah's arrival and even his conduct are marked with this influence. It was not faith alone that was in action, but a protecting power also (compare Ezra 8:22; Neh. 2:7-9). Nevertheless, the separation from all that was not Jewish is carefully maintained (Neh. 2:20; 7:65; 9:2; 10:30; 13:1, 3, 29, 30).

Faith stamps its own character on all surrounding it

This history shews us, first of all, how, when God acts, faith stamps its own character on all who surround it. The Jews, who had so long left Jerusalem desolate, are quite disposed to recommence the work. Judah, however, is discouraged by the difficulties. This brings out the perseverance which characterises true faith when the work is of God, be it ever so poor in appearance. The whole heart is in it, because it is of God. Encouraged by Nehemiah's energy, the people are ready to work and fight at the same time. For faith always identifies God and His people in the heart. And this becomes a spring of devotedness in all concerned.

Let us remark, that in times of difficulty faith does not shew itself in the magnificence of the result, but in love for God's work, however little it may be, and in the perseverance with which it is carried on through all the difficulties belonging to this state of weakness; for that with which faith is occupied, is the city of God and the work of God, and these things have always the same value, whatever may be the circumstances in which they are found.

Chapter 7

The city walls rebuilt; the people numbered

God blesses the labours of the faithful Nehemiah, and Jerusalem is once more encompassed by walls; a less touching condition than when the city of God was defended by the altar of God, which was a testimony to His presence and to the faith of those who erected it; but a condition that proved the faithfulness and loving-kindness of God, who, nevertheless, while outwardly re-establishing them, revoked no part of the judgment pronounced on His people and His city. He who rebuilt the walls was but the vicegerent of a foreign king; and it was the security of the people, and that which uprightness of heart required of them to acknowledge this; and it was done (Neh. 9: 37). Still, God blesses them. Nehemiah recurs to the numbering of the people, according to the register of their genealogies that was drawn up at their first return from captivity, an already distant period. Thus the people are again placed in their cities.

Chapter 8

The law resumes its authority

By means of Ezra and Nehemiah, the law resumes its authority, and that at the people's own request, for God had prepared their hearts. Accordingly, God had gathered them together on the first day of the seventh month. It was really the trumpet of God, although the people were unconscious of it, that gathered them to this new moon, which shone again in grace, whatever might be the clouds that veiled its feeble light. The people's hearts were touched by the testimony of the law, and they wept. But Nehemiah and Ezra bade them rejoice, for the day was holy. Doubtless these men of God were right. Since God was restoring His people, it became them to rejoice and give thanks.

The feast of tabernacles kept with great gladness

The second day, continuing the search into the holy book they found that Israel ought to keep a feast on the fifteenth day of the same month. On restoration from chastening, when the church finds itself again before God, it often happens that precepts are recollected, which had been long forgotten and lost during the apparently better days of God's people; and with the precepts, the blessing that attends their fulfilment is recovered also. Since the days of Joshua, the children of Israel had not followed these ordinances of the law. What a lesson! This feast of tabernacles was kept with great gladness,* a touching expression of the interest with which God marked the return of His people; a partial return, it is true, and soon beclouded (and even the hope to which it gave rise entirely destroyed by the rejection of the Messiah, who should have been its crown), yet of great value, as the first fruits in grace of that restoration which will accompany Israel's turning of heart to Christ, as manifested by their saying, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of Jehovah!" The gladness was sincere and real; but everything was imperfect. The tenth day had not its antitype. Israel's humiliation had, as yet, no connection with that death which at once filled up their iniquity, and atoned for it. Their joy was well founded. It was yet but transient. {* The feast of tabernacles was the celebration of their rest and possession of the land after passing through the wilderness. The booths marked that they had been under tents as pilgrims.

Chapters 9 to 11

Heart-felt repentance: under the law

On the twenty-fourth day, the people came together to humble themselves in a manner that became their position, and they separated themselves from all strangers. Beginning with the blessing promised to Abraham, they relate all the tokens of God's grace bestowed upon Israel, the frequent unfaithfulness of which they had afterwards been guilty, and there is a true expression of heartfelt repentance; they acknowledge without any disguise their condition (Neh. 9:36-37), and undertake to obey the law (Neh. 10), to separate themselves entirely from the people of the land, and faithfully to perform all that the service of the house of God required.

A conditional and Mosaic restoration looked for under Gentile dominion

All this gives a very distinct character to their position. Acknowledging the promise made to Abraham, and the bringing in of the people to Canaan by virtue of this promise, and their subsequent failure, they place themselves again under the obligations of the law, while confessing the goodness of God who had spared them. They do not see beyond a conditional and Mosaic restoration. Neither the Messiah nor the new covenant has any place as the foundation of their joy or of their hope. They are, and they continue to be, in bondage to the Gentiles.

This was Israel's condition until, in the sovereign mercy of God, the Messiah was presented to them. The Messiah could have brought them out of their position and gathered them under His wings, but they would not.

It is this position that the Book of Nehemiah definitely brought out. It is the king's commandment that provides for the maintenance of the singers. A Jew was at the king's hand in all matters concerning the people (Neh. 11:23-24).

Chapters 12 and 13

The dedication of the walls; unfaithfulness and recovery; order and cleansing re-established

We have already seen that gladness was the portion of the people; a joy which acknowledged God, for God had preserved the people and had blessed them. But the princes of the people had immediately relapsed into unfaithfulness; and during Nehemiah's absence the chambers of the temple, in which the offerings had been formerly kept, were given up to Tobiah, that subtle and persevering enemy of God's people. But at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem the joy of the people and the faithfulness of Nehemiah brought them back to the written word, and Israel separated themselves again from the mixed multitude. Tobiah's stuff is cast out of the chamber prepared for him in the temple. The observance of the Sabbath is again enforced. Those who had married strange wives, and whose children spake partly the language of strangers and partly that of the Jews, are put under the curse and sharply rebuked and chastised. The order and the cleansing, according to the law, are re-established, and this leading thought of the book, as to the people's condition, closes the narrative.

That which we have said will give an idea of the great principle of this book.

I will add a few more remarks in this place.