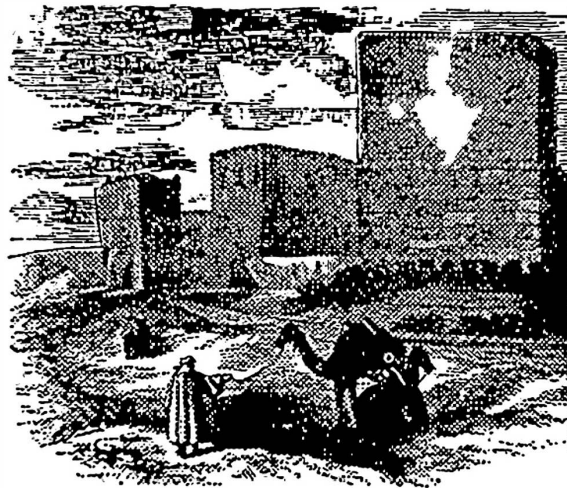


THE WALL OF SEPARATION

An Address on the Book of Nehemiah

By C. H. Brown



The book of Nehemiah is the story of the returned remnant that came back to Jerusalem after seventy years of captivity in Babylon. Both Ezra and Nehemiah are concerning this return. Ezra led a group back and the burden of his heart was the rebuilding of the temple. With Nehemiah it was the rebuilding of the wall.

In the glowing days of Israel's history, the people of God were numbered by the millions; but it was only a little handful, somewhere around sixty thousand, that returned after the captivity. They were a weak lot, yet God gives two whole books of His inspired Word to the story of what happened to them; and most of the second is connected with the building of the wall.

Surely the Word of God is not to be reduced to the level of a lesson in engineering — how to build a wall or a city. Surely there must be a spiritual lesson God intends us to get; so we will try, with the help of the Lord, to get it from some of the outstanding features we find in this book.

It opens with this child of God — servant of God — Nehemiah, exercised about the state of God's people. He was told:

“ ‘The remnant that are left of the captivity 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.’ 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.” Neh. 1:3, 4.

God would have us concerned about the sorrows and distresses that overtake His people. Who can look abroad in the world and witness the broken state of the people of God and not be saddened by it? Everyone of us suffers in his spiritual life as the result of the broken state of Christendom—“**whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it.**” 1 Cor. 12:26. The Apostle refers to all the members down here on this earth. The body of Christ is always viewed as a complete thing in that way. You and I are deprived of the profit our souls might get, because the gifts have placed themselves in a position where we cannot get to them; and we are robbed of the blessing. I do not say God doesn't make it up to us, for He delights to fill up the breach, but we do suffer on account of the broken state of the Church. The sad part is, very few Christians seem to carry any

burden of heart about the divided state of the Church. About ninety-nine per cent take this attitude: "We are pretty well divided up, but, after all, people are different, have different tastes and notions, and I suppose it is about the way the Lord intended it to be"; and thus settle down with the attitude, "we are all headed for the same place, so what is the difference?" That is all right, if you leave the Word of God out, but when you bring in the Scriptures, you will find God warns us of this grievous sin in terms of unqualified condemnation; and he who refuses to heed what He says, is in open antagonism to the plain truth of God.

In Nehemiah, we find a man who suffered in his soul because of the broken state of the people of God. Their own failure, disobedience, rebellion, and naughtiness brought this state upon the people. Why is the Church at large broken into some twenty-five hundred different pieces? It is because of man's wilfulness and rebellion — his insubordination to the Word of God. The little groups seeking to walk in separation, why are they split up? For the same reason: unbroken will and determination to have one's way. "If I cannot have my way, I will pull out!" That has been repeated over and over again. It is a sad thing; division is sin, and there is no excuse made for it in Scripture. Do we feel these things? or do we say, "One group is as good as another; take your choice"? In Luke, chapter twenty-two the Lord doesn't say a word about taking your own choice. There He told His own where to go, and how to find the place, and in such terms that they couldn't possibly lose their way. Is He less concerned about us?

Recently, some one put the question to me, "Do you think the way you meet is right?" My reply was, "How do you think we ought to meet?" This one admitted that our only guide is the Word of God.

". . . I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible 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, which I pray before Thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel Thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against Thee; both I and my father's house have sinned." Neh. 1:5, 6.

He doesn't take the attitude, "everybody is to blame but me," but casts himself in as part of the common failure.

"Remember, I beseech Thee, the word that Thou commandedst Thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: but if ye turn unto Me and keep My commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there." Neh. 1:8, 9.

I think there is a very precious principle here. Let us try to get it. In other words, it doesn't matter how far one may get away from the truth and be mixed up in the confusion there is all around, if there is the getting down before God, there is a God-given way back. "Though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence,

and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there." "He that gathereth not with Me scattereth." Luke 11:23. There is only one rallying point, one gathering center; God gathers souls to Christ. "Yet will I gather them."

Do you think God gathers people in division? What does that verse in the 14th of 1st Corinthians say? "God is not the author of confusion." v. 33. What could be more inclusive? Is not division the worst kind of confusion? What a Babel of voices, "Come with us; come with us"! Is God the author of it? "God is not the author of confusion."

God is a gatherer here: "I will gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there." Who makes the choice? Surely not I. People say, "It is up to you." Nothing of the kind! This is God's choice. I have no choice in the matter at all; I am to find the place of His appointment, and be sure that I am there. God takes the responsibility for the place to which we shall be gathered. "And will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there."

Beloved saints of God, do you think if God was that solicitous in the economy of twilight, that He is less solicitous under the economy of the noon-day sun? since the revelation of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus? when all has been revealed, and there is nothing more to come out? Is God less particular now? Surely not. Is God changeable, capricious, that He set such high value on His name in the Old Testament, and reverses Himself in the New and tells us that any place is all right? Surely not; He is not inconsistent. He says, "The place that I have chosen to set My name." God chose the place; He set His name there. Do you

want another name? What an insult to God to invite to some other name, to advertise some other name than His worthy name. If you turn to Matthew 18:20, you find that familiar statement: **"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."** That is a wonderful place, isn't it? What could be more precious! Are you there? If not, why not? Is there not such a place? Do you mean to tell me that God has marked out a path for my feet according to the admonitions of His Word, and then has denied me the privilege of it? I do not think our blessed Lord mocks us. I believe, if the Word of God shows us a path He has marked out, He will preserve that path that we might walk in it, don't you?

It is true that in the days of Nehemiah the path was a difficult one; very few found it. Out of the millions who were carried away and scattered over the face of the earth, only about sixty thousand had the heart to come back. When they got back, many dropped out, lost heart, became a weight upon their brethren, linked themselves up with the enemies around them; still, in the midst of all that, there were those who had a heart for the truth of God. Nehemiah acts in the energy of faith. Nehemiah not only had the theory of the thing in his head, but he exerted his energies that he might walk in the path of that truth. We find him at work in the next chapter:

"Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request?" Neh. 2:4. Before he says a word to the king, he lifts up his heart to the God of heaven: **"So I prayed to the God of heaven."** He sends up a little prayer. You can pray about something, if it is according to the Word of God.

He brings God in, and then addresses the king. He asks him if he might be permitted to go back to that city so waste and so tried. In the 8th verse we get the answer to that little prayer: **“And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.”** He gets back of the king to the God who answered his prayer. The king was the instrument in the hand of God. God wants us to get back to Him, and realize that He is the One who has charge of the circumstances. As Mr. Darby said, “God is behind the scenes, and moves all the scenes He is behind.”

Nehemiah didn't let any time go to waste; he acted in the energy of faith. If God shows us a path, if we see it in the Word of God, we ought to act. How many a soul has seen the path, and refused to act. They counted the cost and it was too great; and they turned back to their own loss. It isn't that way with Nehemiah; he sees the path and acts, and so he is back at Jerusalem in a short time.

“And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire . . . Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned. And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.” Neh. 2:13, 15, 16.

He was acting for God, and he wasn't going to submit the case to the rulers and leaders, lest they be fainthearted and discourage him, so he

slipped out by night. We get his conclusions in the 17th verse:

"Then said I 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."

It is a holy ambition; here is a man fired with a zeal to get back to first principles. He says, "We need that wall; now let us get busy and build it!" He has the courage to go ahead and do it. Have we the courage to return to first principles? If we have, it will demand a course of action that will not be popular with folks around us. We shall see that as we go on.

He runs into opposition right away, and plenty of it. What do you think a wall speaks of? For example: look at the wall of this room; what is that wall for? It is to separate this room from the next. A wall speaks of separation. That is a word we shy away from: SEPARATION. Sometimes we who have been on the road a long time would like to tame down that word, separation.

Nehemiah has made up his mind that every cubic foot of that wall is going to be restored to its normal height, and every gate replaced; regardless of what it costs he is going to do it. He had plenty of trouble, but he actually got the wall built. And so, brethren, if you and I are going to seek to follow the Word of God and get back to first principles, how far do we want to go? Do we say, "The old wall used to be twenty feet, but I think if we make it ten feet, that will do"? In other words, do we only want to act fifty per cent on what we have in the Word of God? I do not find any indulgence of that kind in the Word of

God; it says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." Matt. 4:4. Every direction that I find in Scripture should have a living voice for my soul, and I should not be satisfied with anything less. That was Nehemiah.

Now Nehemiah is in for trouble. "But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?" Neh. 2:19.

They laughed the whole thing to scorn. Surely they would. It did look ridiculous, silly, on the face of it. That poor little remnant attempting to restore that wall! Those Arabians were blood relatives with some of these men. How many a believer has been laughed out of the path of separation — the very smallness and weakness of it! Sometimes it becomes like what the sons of the prophets said, "Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us" (2 Kings 6:1); many a one has broken fellowship and gone out and become more or less of a wanderer. I know a brother and his wife who had that experience. They became offended and went away. After quite a lapse of time, I met the wife and said to her, "Where are you and your husband attending meeting?" She replied, "We are just religious tramps!" If you and I once give up the truth, we are pretty apt to become religious tramps. That sister and her husband are not religious tramps any more, and a happy pair they are.

There is plenty of opposition if you and I want to tread the path of separation. One of the first

things the enemy will try, will be to ridicule the whole thing. "Who do you think you are? Are you going to set aside the garnered experience of the Church through eighteen hundred years, and go back to first principles?" One might say to such, "The garnered experience of which church?" We are to follow the Word of God; that is all we have.

These in Nehemiah's day ridiculed the whole thing, but in chapter 2:20 he answered 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."** There is no boasting. That isn't boasting; that is allegiance. Where are they going to get the plans? They are going to build on **the old foundation.**

Anticipating a little, look at chapter 4:10: **"The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish."** Isn't that the truth? Going back to chapter 2:20, what about the "much rubbish"? There is only one thing to do: dig through it down to the old foundation. How much rubbish has accumulated in Christendom! It is amazing as you look upon the state of things today. Modern ecclesiastical standards of elaborate architecture, gorgeous vestments, symphonic music, clerical hierarchy, etc., are all just so much rubbish. So here, they had to dig deep to get to the foundation.

"But ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem." These men (of the 19th verse) were the worldly connections who wanted to ingratiate themselves with those who were going to build the wall. Every time Christians seek funds from an unsaved man, or even accept funds with-

out solicitation, they are violating this verse: "neither part nor lot in this matter." The early servants went forth, "taking nothing of the Gentiles." Do we have some sort of special deposition, that we can go out and solicit funds from the world to carry on the Lord's work? If in communion with the mind of the Lord, we not only will not solicit money, but will not accept it if offered.

In the next chapter we find them at work: **"And next unto them the Tekoites repaired; but their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord."** Neh. 3:5. We can get too big for the simple things of Christ. When that lovely wall was all finished, and the enemy disconcerted and put to rout, these nobles could have no satisfaction in it; they were too big to humble themselves and build. That meant some had to do double work. As we go down the chapter we find double work and double reward.

"Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, of the goldsmiths . . . Hananiah the son of one of the apothecaries . . . Malchijah the son of Harim, and Hashub the son of Pahath-moab, repaired the other piece, and the tower of the furnaces." vv. 8, 11. Quite a comedown for a goldsmith and a druggist to work on a piece of masonry. In the 12th verse we find the women shared in this too. **"Shallum the son of Haloresh, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, he and his daughters."** There is plenty of work for sisters to do. You will never find a slighting remark made about women in Scripture. Each dear saint of God has a work to do.

"But the dung gate repaired Malchiah the son of Rechab, the ruler of part of Beth-haccerem; he built it, and set up the doors thereof, the locks

thereof, and the bars thereof." v. 14. People don't like doors and locks and bars; they want everything just thrown wide open. God believes in a "within" and a "without." The enemy doesn't like walls and gates and bars, so would level everything. If you are going to maintain the truth of God, you will have a place for the wall and locks and bars. The Psalmist says, "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness." What is the use of a doorkeeper if you haven't any doors? God intends us to be careful of those with whom we have fellowship, that we perpetuate a "within" and a "without"; we are not in communion with God if we rule them out.

"Baruch the son of Zabbai earnestly repaired." v. 20. Some do their work half-heartedly, some whole-heartedly. Anticipating again, turn over to chapter 7:2: "For he was a faithful man, and feared God above many." I think that is one of the nicest appellations that could ever come to any of us. Don't you covet something like that? God wants that kind of men today. What makes that kind of men? Walking in obedience to the will of God, happily and steadily, not going spasmodically.

"Every one over against his house." Neh. 3:28. You have your work to do for the Lord; don't expect someone else to do it. No one else can do the work that is cut out for you. I wonder how many of us are contributing to the wall, helping to maintain a path of separation in this world. Sometimes when we find brethren indifferent and careless about the truth, and walking so loosely, we wonder if there would be a path to walk in if it depended upon such. Each one of us is respon-

sible for the piece of wall that lies right in front of where we live. Is it easier for another Christian to see the path of separation because of the way you are living? We influence one another; you cannot say, "No one pays any attention to me." Scripture says, **"Make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed."** Heb. 12:13. Some one coming along behind is weaker than you are. Oh, we are all pretty weak, but there is always some one a little weaker. How good if you and I can help a weak and staggering one to find the path. "Let it rather be healed."

"But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall." Neh. 4:1-3. They were having a lot of sport with them. I can just see those big coarse men standing and looking at this work of the Lord, laughing and passing the joke back and forth about the wall. This Tobiah thought he was very clever in saying, "If a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall."

Nehemiah goes to the Lord about it: **"Hear, O our God; for we are despised."** v. 4. God does hear when we are despised. He feels for us. He knows what it is to tread a path of rejection; that is the kind of path the Lord Jesus trod. He was "a

man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Man rejected Him, saw no beauty in Him that he should desire Him. That is what we read of Him in Isaiah 53. Do you and I want to be accepted where He was rejected?

"Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses." v. 14. Do we want a path for our children to walk in, in this world of sin and confusion? a clean place for them? Let us see to it that we ourselves maintain this path. If we forsake the path, if we say, "It isn't worth while," then our children will have none to walk in.

"And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work." v. 15. Isn't that nice! Do you think two or three brothers ought to do it all? Each one has his function. The Lord put it this way: "dividing to every man severally as He will." "To every man his work." 1 Cor. 12: 11; Mark 13:34. He expects each to serve Him in the path of obedience.

"I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another." v. 19. They were a weak lot. Isn't there a striking word in that for us? We are separated from each other by great distances in some cases. "In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us; our God shall fight for us." v. 20. If we can keep up these links and seek to make our brethren feel that they are one in a common testimony, even though separated by great distances, this

will be an encouragement. These are days of weakness and feebleness, but if we are found laboring together, and have the consciousness that He is sufficient, He will sustain us and carry us through. "So we labored in the work." v. 21.

"Now it came to pass, when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;) that Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief. 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?" Neh. 6:1-3.

The enemy cannot say that a fox would break down the wall now! So new tactics are employed. They resort to an attempt at compromise; but Nehemiah and his company have a sense of divine values and are not to be dissuaded. Measured by human standards, the building of a wall was an event of minor significance. The whole importance of this situation lay in the fact of WHAT wall it was, and WHERE it was. "God hath not forsaken us . . . but hath extended mercy unto us . . . to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem." Ezra 9:9. It was God's wall, and when finished was dedicated to Him: "the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem." Neh. 12:27. Secondly, it was situated "in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion . . . the city of the great King." Psa. 48:1, 2. It was God's city. There-

fore Nehemiah, in the full dignity of faith, could say, "I am doing a great work."

So in connection with our peculiar privilege today of maintaining a testimony to true separation; all, as measured by outward success or achievement, may appear small and mean, as did Nehemiah's wall; but if it is God's Word, God's truth, God's testimony for which we contend, this is what gives such a path its divine warrant.

Nehemiah's enemies sought with all their subtlety to induce him into a path of compromise; so from the outside they called upon him to come out into the plain of Ono and talk things over. But what was there to talk over? Nehemiah knew where he stood; he knew that wall was of **God**, and to desert it for the plain of Ono was, as he said, to "come down."

Brethren, if we are occupying a position of separation as marked out in the Word of God (and who would have us to be satisfied with anything less?), why should we leave it to "come down" to those who insist on an adjusted basis of fellowship less rigid in character? Have we any right to contend for anything less than the whole truth? No, dear brethren, let us be persuaded from our meditation on this portion of the Scriptures that we can have no commission from God to discount His standard of separation, even in the degree of five per cent. Let us hear once again that ringing challenge of the prophet Isaiah:

"To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." Isa. 8:20.

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