

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of NEHEMIAH

The book of Nehemiah continues the story of the post-exilic period of Jewish history. The 'twentieth year' referred to in 1:1 refers to the reign of king Artaxerxes (see 2:1), and dates the beginning of the book at about 445/444 BC, that is, at a point some 14 years after the return of Ezra to Jerusalem in 458 BC. The prominent feature of the work of restoration recorded in Ezra is the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem; the prominent feature in Nehemiah is the rebuilding of the walls of the city. It is to this major enterprise that we are introduced now, and the book describes how that rebuilding came to pass.

1) 1:1

There is one general lesson that we may gather at the outset from the date of Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem, especially when we think of it in the context of the over-all return of the people of God from exile. We saw at the beginning of Ezra that the first return from exile under Zerubbabel and Joshua took place in 538 BC, the Temple was completed in 516 BC, Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458 BC - and now Nehemiah returned in 444 BC. This means that the work of rehabilitation was spread over a period of about a hundred years, and took place in several stages. This is an impressive fact, and to view it in its over-all pattern enables us to see it in true perspective, and to assess its various aspects and component parts in relation to the strategic whole, and see something of their significance. This tells us, for one thing, that no one man or one group has more than a part to play in the fulfilment of the divine purposes. We are each allotted a share (Paul's word for this in Ephesians 1:11 is 'kleronomia' - a share), and only a share. Our job is to do it with all our might. For one thing, it shows us that God's work, and the fulfilment of His purposes, takes time, and that often He works on a long-term plan. This is borne out in the history of the Church as well as in Scripture, and we shall pause to consider a particular instance of this in the next Note.

2) 1:1

We have from time to time mentioned in our studies the pattern of spiritual awakening in the nineteenth century in this country, and we can certainly see a long-term, broad-based strategy at work in it. Two points in particular may be underlined. The first is this: Dr. J. Edwin Orr, in his valuable account of what he calls the Second Evangelical Awakening (referring to the 1859 revival) gives it as his view that the 1859 revival really lasted half a century, with three major 'movements' within it - 1859/61, the first effusion of the Spirit; the Moody and Sankey work in the 1870-80 period; and the evangelistic impetus of the Torrey/Chapman/Alexander movement in the 1890's, culminating in the Welsh revival of 1904 - a period in all of nearly fifty years. The second point is that, even before the 1859 movement, there were lesser 'movements' associated with men like Murray McCheyne, the Bonars, William C. Burns, and others, not forgetting the spiritual impetus of the Disruption in the Scottish Church in 1843. The 'work' of the 19th century was therefore one that was spread over some seventy-five years, in the economy and purpose of God. One recalls what is said of the children of Issacher in 1 Chronicles 12:32, that they were 'men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do' - this is the kind of understanding and discernment we need to have today, to see and assess the significance of various movements in our time, see their inter-relation with one another, and be enabled to make our contribution, as called, to the onward march of the purposes of God.

3) I:I

The second thing that we learn in this connection is the fact of the continuing activity of God in restoring and renewing grace - again and again and again on the initiative to bless and fulfil and further His work -through Zerubbabel first of all, and Haggai and Zechariah; then through Ezra and Malachi, and now through Nehemiah. We see this in two respects, (i) in relation to, and in face of, human inertia, and (ii) in relation to, and in face of, human opposition (in both these aspects we see a remarkable similarity to the onward movement of God's work in the Acts of the Apostles.

There was surely human inertia in this particular situation. We have seen it already in our studies in Ezra, in the easy discouragement into which the returned exiles fell when opposition arose; and in the complacency and laxity which became their later characteristic, and the final backslidden state which well-nigh broke Ezra's heart (Ezra 9/10). And it is in this context that we see God sending His Word and His men again and again with messages of grace to His people. We must remember the strategic purpose of God in all His dealings with His people - the ultimate coming forth of a Saviour from them. Everything leads and points to this, and everything must be understood in its light. This is enormously encouraging, for it reveals a divine sovereignty that is not prepared to be hindered or frustrated by our weakness or lack of vision. But it is also frightening, because if our hindrances are too much of an obstacle, He will simply sweep us aside, and fulfil His will through someone else.

There was also, however, human opposition, in the enemies from without, who constantly harried and harassed God's people. But, just as in Acts, every opposition became the vehicle of divine grace and reaction to defeat it and set it at naught. Again and again, God-over ruled the opposition for His own sovereign purposes. And these purposes, in purifying a separated people and building His holy city were fulfilled, none hindering. Our God is marching on!

4) 1:1-4

The lesson of these verses has a connection with what has just been said. We see Nehemiah deeply grieved and distressed by the news he receives from one of his brethren about the state of the returned exiles and about Jerusalem. There are different views of this. Some think that the reference must be to a breach of the walls of Jerusalem of recent date - for it is pointed out that Nehemiah must certainly have known that the city had been razed by Nebuchadnezzar, and he could hardly be reacting to this information as if he had never heard it before. This is true, but we need not think that this is how and why he was reacting. He did know, of course, that the walls had been breached by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. But it was no new catastrophe he was mourning. It was rather the news and the realisation that, ninety years after the first return of the exiles the walls still had not been rebuilt. That was Nehemiah's distress! His feelings must have been very like those that impelled William Carey to go out to India with the gospel message - the realisation that, so many centuries after the gospel had been given so many millions in the world had never heard the name of Jesus. It was the reproach of the long delay that appalled them both - as indeed it ought to do to us today. Why should we hear the Word of God twice or thrice a week, year in, year out, when there are so many in the world who have never heard it once? Why indeed? It was out of this distress that things began for Nehemiah, and it was in this sense of reproach that he heard the voice of God, as it were, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And he said, 'Here am I, send me'. There was born, in this distress and anguish that the news about Jerusalem brought to his spirit, the conviction that he must himself do something about it.

5) 1:5-11

Nehemiah's distress, and the growing conviction of his heart that he himself was to be somehow involved in what God was about to do, drove him to prayer. It is well that we should recognise that the decision to approach the king on the matter of his going to Jerusalem was no sudden, flash-in-the-pan impulse, as far as Nehemiah was concerned. In 1:1 the month Chisleu is mentioned (this corresponds to our December) while in 2:1 the month Nisa is referred to (this corresponds to our April). For a matter of months, then, this man was in an agony of spirit, wrestling with God in prayer. The prayer in these verses is perhaps better regarded as the theme of his prayers during these months, than a once-for-all outpouring of his heart. It is almost necessary to interpret it in this way to understand the passage of time, as during these months of prayer it became clearer and clearer that God was saying, 'Yes, Nehemiah, I want you to go back to Jerusalem'. This is how it was with Nehemiah. And there came a point, just before he went to the king, at which all the agony and all the wrestling became crystallised in a prayer of the utmost simplicity, as we see in 11. In its essentials, Nehemiah's prayer can be summed up in these words: 'this day, this man'. What elemental simplicity, clear-cut and unequivocal. After confession of sin, in which he identified himself with the nation in its sin and shame (and the woe and shame of the Church today is our shame also), and the agonising, in which the battle was fought and won in the secret place, pleading the covenant and the promises, Nehemiah broke through to the place of power: 'Lord, this day, this man'. And prayer prevailed.

6) 2:1-8

These verses describe Nehemiah audience with the king, and its issue. The first thing we must say about them is that they afford a striking example of the miraculous providence of God at work, in the arrangement of events in the fulfilment of the strategic purposes of God. In saying this we are simply saying something that is true of the whole post-exilic movement. The providence of God was their defence and their enabling all along the line. Here was a situation in which, humanly speaking, the very last thing that might have been expected was the king's permission for, and blessing on, Nehemiah's proposal. When one thinks of the nature of these ancient empires, autocratic, dictatorial, and utterly ruthless, one can only marvel that things turned out as they did. Nehemiah's fear and trepidation are very evident - he was conscious that he might well have lost his head for his temerity - and this is sufficient to indicate that what did happen was completely against the run of normal probability. It is true that Artaxerxes is spoken of by the historians as one who was rather less ruthless than some of his forbears or successors, but even so he was an eastern potentate, and eastern potentates were not then any more disposed than western ones are now to listen to the pleas of individuals. Yet, contrary to all expectations, and indeed all hope, God over-ruled, and the third return from exile was soon in process of being accomplished.

7) 2:1-8

There are several points to underline in this. For one thing, this is only one of many illustrations of the over-ruling of God in the experience of His people, and in the furtherance of His will in and through them. One recalls, for example, the story of Moses in the bull rushes, and the miraculous preservation of the child who was to be the nation's deliverer, and the easy sovereignty of God in so preserving him. Moses, Pharaoh's ultimate victor, is sent to Pharaoh's court for his upbringing, and is nourished and nurtured by Pharaoh's daughter, who actually pays Moses' mother an allowance to bring up her own child (this is the first known instance of the family allowance system)! That is how sovereign God's providence is! For another thing, what happened on this occasion was the overturning of an earlier decree made by the king (Ezra 4:21). That had been categorical enough, at all events. But now, God completely changed the situation. Blank refusals are no obstacle to God, when He determines to act.

We should note the language Nehemiah uses in 4 and 5: 'I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said unto the king....' This has been well described as sending a 'sky-telegram' to God! Instant, ejaculatory prayer, up it went in an instant of time! Do we catch the thrill and excitement of it? One has only to apply a little imagination to realise what a nerve-wracking experience it must have been for Nehemiah to have been confronted with the king's question in that way. The fear, the trepidation, was natural and inevitable, but alongside it and in the midst of it, fearlessness and intrepid boldness. This is a characteristic paradox of true Christian experience.

8) 2:1-8

Courage has been defined as being not so much the absence of fear, as faithfulness in spite of it. We do despite to the whole human situation if we imagine that it is ever easy to take a stand such as Nehemiah took here. Who could ever regard it as an effortless exercise, when so much for weal or woe might depend on it? What is important, however, for us to realise is that human weakness and timidity do not matter, if only we have faith in a strong and mighty God. This is our real encouragement. One thinks of our Lord's words to His disciples in Mark 13:11: 'Take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak.... but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Spirit'. This was surely Nehemiah's experience.

We should note also what is said in 8, '...according to the good hand of my God upon me'. Nehemiah, in spite of the trembling and fear, was sure of God, and therefore all was well. It is very wonderful to know that alongside very natural and human fears and nervousness one may have such a confidence. We see this very graphically portrayed in Paul's words to the Corinthians, 'I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech was.... in demonstration of the Spirit and of power' (1 Corinthians 2:34). One has heard of preachers, men who have moved thousands for God, pacing their vestries before preaching, gripped by a sense of inadequacy and nervousness and fear. This should serve as a corrective to the false impressions we sometimes have of the nature of Christian stand and testimony, when we think there must be something wrong and defective in us when we feel afraid in the Lord's service. Nehemiah was clearly terrified, and expended nervous energy to a marked degree, yet he was sure of God. To be conscious of the good hand of God upon us is the only thing that matters.

9) 2:9-10

We see from these verses that Nehemiah is shown at the very outset that things are not going to be easy for him. This also is a parable of Christian experience. The words at the end of 10, 'a man come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel' are surely significant: such a man is a sure target for the archers. And such men must learn to interpret the unwelcome attentions of the enemy in terms of the work that is yet to be done by them in the future. Paul, speaking of Satan, says, 'We are not ignorant of his devices'; but it is all too often true, even in the context of knowing our Bibles, that we are ignorant of his devices when it comes to our own experience. 'Know your enemy' - this is the lesson here, 'and learn when and where he is apt to strike'. This is a word of immense importance for those who are engaged, or about to engage in Christian service. There are points at which Satan will try to wreck our future, and we simply must recognise this possibility, and reckon with it. The actual opposition of Nehemiah's enemies is not in fact mentioned in these verses, it is simply pointed out that the enemies are there; but it is not long before they go into action. But Nehemiah is reminded at the outset that there is such a thing as active opposition against any projected work of God. And so are we. Let us pay good heed to the warning.

10) 2:9 10

In 9 we are told that the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with Nehemiah; whereas in Ezra 8:22 Ezra said, 'I was ashamed to require of the king's band of soldiers and horsemen'. The contradiction that has sometimes been assumed here is only a seeming one. The situations were different. Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for protection because he had already said to him that his God would be all the protection he needed. Nehemiah did not ask for the soldiers: they were given him, and it would have been foolish to have made an issue of this on the mistaken ground of supposing that it was a greater evidence of faith not to have soldiers than to have them. After all, God's providential protection often works through natural, ordinary means. When Paul's life was threatened in Jerusalem, God's providence became his defence - not through a band of angels, but a band of Roman soldiers. We must beware of despising or repudiating the ordinary, in preference to the spectacular providence of God. Furthermore, Nehemiah's dangers were not 'on the way', as Ezra's were, but dangers in Jerusalem itself, where forces of opposition were organised, and could be combated only by military means. Of course God could have sent angels, to Paul and Nehemiah alike, but He did not. We would be all the better of being as 'down-to-earth' as He is in His use of the ordinary. Sometimes He is so ordinary in His working that we miss Him; our eyes are too bemused with looking for the spectacular. A whirlwind is more dramatic than a still small voice, but we may hear far more in the latter than in the former!

11) 2:11-16

Nehemiah came to Jerusalem (11) and was there three days. In 12 we have the record of his secret inspection of the city walls. It is striking to see how quietly this new work began. There was no ostentation, no display, no advertisement, all was quiet and unobtrusive. How very different from the modern conception of how Christian work should be done, with press-relations and public-relations officers, here things began in the middle of the night with a secret inspection, yet there was a wise and thorough appraisal of the whole situation, and of all that needed to be done. The picture is more like that of a general surveying the battlefield and the disposition of the enemy. Here was a man, called to do a specific work, on whose hand, on whose life God's hand was resting, quietly inspecting the scene of his future labours (is it not wisdom to have a good look at what is to be done, and consider well, before starting any project?). One can imagine the sense of desolation in Nehemiah's heart as he saw the ruins of the wall and realised the magnitude of the task before him. As we see him in the dark watches of the night, going round the walls from the south west gate and up the east side, past the Pool of Siloam and through the valley of the Kedron to the north side of the city, we readily think of a greater than Nehemiah who later stood where he stood, overlooking the moral ruins of the city and wept over it, crying, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets...how often would I have gathered thy children together....and ye would not' (Matthew 23:37). This must have been Nehemiah's feeling as he stood there, reflecting the great love and compassion in his heart for the city of his fathers.

12) 2:17-20

In the realisation of the magnitude of the task that faced him, Nehemiah went back to the people and confronted them with the challenge and exhortation recorded in 17ff. He put before them a clear-cut objective. There was no doubt in his mind as to what had to be done. This is a 'sine qua non' of effective service for God. We cannot serve Him as if we are not very sure of what we are doing or supposed to be doing. Let us therefore ask ourselves, in the light of this word, whether we are clear in the Church as to what we are about in our day and generation. This is exactly what we are called to do: to build up the walls of Jerusalem. Our work is a work of rehabilitation, a restoring of the lost glories of the Church of God. We have lived through a time of declension, but thank God there are many signs of renewal, and many signs that there are those who see what needs to be done, and are committing themselves to this work, in the same spirit as the people here committed themselves.

We should notice particularly the basis on which Nehemiah rested his exhortation - the hand of God upon him, and the promises made to him in his inmost soul. Given this, he could go on in utter confidence. And all honour to the people (18b), for they recognised that God had spoken to him, and leader and led were all of one mind in the work. The evidence in their eyes was indisputable: against all the laws of human probability, Artaxerxes had opened the door for the work to begin, and they recognised that God was at work for them. This was the ground of their endeavour. 'Let us rise up and build' - how wonderful for that spirit to grip a people!

13) 2:17-20

There are never lacking people who despise and laugh to scorn those who take such an attitude of spiritual enterprise, as we see in 19. Amused cynicism is the order of the day, and it is usually not very long before amusement and contempt turn into active opposition and, behind the scenes, attack. One has seen this again and again in the life of the Church, sadly enough. There are always the Sanballats and Tobiahs who will sneer at what they call the spiritual arrogance of the stand that evangelicals are taking in the land today. But the decisive, and sufficient, answer to this contempt is the same as Nehemiah's: 'The God of heaven, He will prosper us'. This is either true, or it is not. If it is, there will be ample vindication for all the contempt and contumely showered upon God's servants. Tobiah and Sanballat might have said, as a riposte to Nehemiah's confidence: 'That remains to be seen'. But it was seen: God did prosper them, He fulfilled His Word, and the work was completed. This is the one great circumstance, that the hand of our God should be good upon us. Given this, there is nothing that is not possible. How true it was of Nehemiah - he was a man under authority, and therefore God's man for the hour. O for such men in the Church of God today!

14) 3:1

This chapter is simply a chronicle, a record, of the various people and groups who engaged in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The more one studies it - and it should be studied with the help of a map or diagram of the city wall (such as is found at the back of most bibles or in a good bible dictionary) - the more fascinating, informative and suggestive it becomes. Even such a chronicle of names can say so much! And when we remember that the spiritual application is surely to the rebuilding of the lost heritages in our national spiritual life, it becomes a record that is full of instruction and challenge for us. It is in this way that we must look at it. There are several salient points. First of all, we are told of Eliashib the high priest and his brethren, and the work they did in the building of the sheep-gate. This tells us, for one thing, that a lead was given in the work by God's appointed ministers. It has, alas, not always been so in the history of the Church. All too often, renewal has come, not through the official ministry of the day, but through others on whom God has laid his hand. Evidence of this is seen both in Scripture itself, and in the record of spiritual awakening in the post-Reformation era. One thinks of the 8th century BC, when the official priesthood was so worldly and corrupt that God had to go outside them altogether, and called a herdsman of Tekoa, Amos, to preach His Word. The great evangelical awakening of the mid-19th century saw God lay His hand on numbers of laymen, untutored in theology, and make of them flames of fire in the preaching of the gospel. This need not have been, and should not have been; and, happily, in Nehemiah's time it was very different. The lead came from the right place. That was one of the strengths of the work, and its immense hopefulness.

15) 3:1-32

It will be noticed that in 1-3 the word 'builder' is used to describe the work that the priests did, whereas in the verses that follow (4ff) it is the word 'repaired'. This seems to imply that the northern wall, on which the priests were engaged, was completely broken, whereas other parts were less extensively damaged. That is to say, a start was made in the building at the point where the damage was worst, and therefore the danger from further attack was greatest. This is surely good strategy, and it has something to teach us from the spiritual point of view. What would we say was the point of greatest need in the life of the Church today? Has it not been the need to recover a true and authoritative ministry of the Word? Is it not here, then, that our energies should be concentrated? There are many pieces of useful work that can be done in the Church, to be sure, very worthy and excellent in themselves, but surely, in the light of what we read here, it should be a question of putting first things first. Have we discernment to see that 'other things' can, and must, be left aside, so that urgent priorities can be attended to?

We may apply this also to personal life. Do we know the weakest points of our own inner defence against the enemy? Have we been aware of the dangers that threaten us there, and do we attend with particular and especial care to our defences at the places where our nature and temperament pose real problems for us? Or are we simply careless about that 'northern gate'? If so, is it surprising that our spiritual life is being devastated, with the enemy coming in like a flood?

16) 3:1-32

We read in 5 that the nobles of Tekoa were unwilling to bend their necks to the work of the Lord. That is to say, they disdained the common work and took no part in it. Of all the workers, they are the only ones of whom this is said, for there was an amazing unity and unanimity among them, apart from the Tekoites. Well, they have achieved the doubtful distinction of being recorded in the book of God for all time as being unwilling. What a memorial! To have this recorded of them, in a time when the Spirit of God was so manifestly at work, when a work of such magnitude and significance was being accomplished - what a reproach indeed! Nor is the present day application hard to see. Perhaps they thought that Nehemiah's plan was too ambitious and idealistic and impracticable, and would never succeed. Perhaps, as some commentators suggest, they have had secret sympathies with Sanballat and Tobiah. People like to be on the side of the angels, but alas they sometimes make grave mistakes in the estimation of where the angels are! Would it not be better to be dead than to have it said of us that we had no part in the building of God's Zion in our day, in the spiritual rehabilitation of Scotland?

Here and there throughout the chapter reference is made to a second piece of work being fulfilled by one group and another. In 27 we see that the Tekoites were among them, and this may have significance in relation to what has just been said. Perhaps they were so ashamed of their nobles in their failure that they felt honour-bound to fulfil their lack of service. At all events, they and others did extra stints. There was none of the 'we've done our bit, let others do theirs' attitude about them. They saw the need, and this was the compelling consideration. That is a great way to live, and that is how the work gets done!

17) 3:1-32

The reference in 12 to the daughters of Shallum is intriguing. One wonders what lies behind this part of the record. Had some others defaulted, that the women had to do the work? The question is often asked on the mission fields of the world, 'Where are all the men', that so many women have to do work that only men have the physical resources to do? Thank God for the devotion and faithfulness of women missionaries, but what is going to be recorded in the book of God about the men who should have been there, but defaulted?

Notice the fascinating reference in 14. A ruler was working at this unpleasant and insalubrious part of the wall - away from any place which could be called 'front-line' activity. Facing the enemy has always a certain thrill about it, but humdrum work does not have nearly so much appeal. But it needs to be done, and what is more, it needs vision to do it, and endurance and patience. Here was a man of very different calibre from the nobles of Tekoa!

And what shall we say of Baruch, the 'earnest' repairer in 20? Some suggest that it means simply that some people take their work more seriously than others. It is surely something, in such a work as this, when so many were so deeply and enthusiastically committed, that there was someone who stood out, even in such a dedicated company, as being pre-eminent in the quality of his work. It has sometimes been suggested that the post-exilic leaders never rose to the heights of spiritual inspiration that marked the pre-exilic prophets. Perhaps so: but it is impressive to see the level of consecrated endeavour to which Nehemiah's leadership brought the people. This argues a spiritual inspiration of a very high order indeed. God's man for this hour was certainly not lacking in stature!

18) 3:1-32

Another point to notice in this long and interesting chapter is the varying kinds of people involved in the work of rebuilding - priests, Levites, nobles, goldsmiths, apothecaries (8), merchants (32). There were apparently no demarcation problems in those days! The great lesson in this is a very characteristic New Testament one - that of diversity in unity, and the counterpart in apostolic teaching is found in passages such as Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul speaks of the body of Christ and 'members in particular'. This means that we have all different functions to fulfil, and different contributions to make to the whole. Presumably Nehemiah attended to the allocation of the tasks - there must have been some co-ordinating power in charge of it all. In the Christian sense, it is God who sets the tasks in the Church. How wise, then, to accept His giving, and not covet another's place or gift. To do so means both that we trespass beyond the God-appointed bounds that have been placed upon us, and also that we neglect our own proper work. We have a part, and only a part, to play, and if it is small and unobtrusive, we must content ourselves with it, and realise that only in acceptance of it will true happiness and peace and wholeness be found.

Furthermore, everyone was 'next to' someone else, and obviously they could not all have been congenial companions. But it is certain that Nehemiah did not have time to be scuttling around trying to make sure that abrasive personalities would not be rubbing against one another. One does not have time for that sort of luxury when there is danger in the air and there is work to be done. So the most diverse types had to work alongside each other, priests alongside the men of Jericho (did this cramp the latter's style?) rulers alongside commoners. This is the great enriching quality in the Church of God, this is the true meaning of fellowship - the coming together of people all different to one another, all unequal to one another, and therefore, because unequal, utterly dependent on one another.

19) 3:1-32

As a postscript to our study of this chapter, here is a comment by Dr James Denney which is worthy of careful consideration, on the subject of diversity in unity. Interpreting Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:17, 'If any man be in Christ he is a new creature', he says:

'Those who are in Christ have died to the whole order of life in which men are judged 'after the flesh'. Perhaps the Christian Church has almost as much need as any other society to lay this to heart. We are still too ready to put stress on distinctions which are quite in place in the world, but are without ground in Christ. Even in a Christian congregation there is recognition of wealth, of learning, of social position, in some countries of face, which is not Christian. I do not say these distinctions are not real, but they are meaningless in relation to Christ, and ought not to be made. To make them narrow and impoverishes the soul. If we associate only with people of a certain station, all our thoughts and feelings are limited to a very small area of human life; but if distinctions of station, of intelligence, of manners, are lost in the common relation to Christ, then life is open to us in all its length and breadth; all things are ours, because we are His. To be guided by worldly distinctions is to know only a few people, and to know them by what is superficial in their nature: but to see that such distinctions died in Christ's death, and to look at men in relation to Him Who is Redeemer and Lord of all, is to know all our brethren, and to know them not on the surface, but to the heart.'

20) 4:1-3

In chapter 2 we were introduced to the villains of the piece, Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite (2:10), and given notice that trouble was to be expected from that quarter. Here, we see how that trouble materialised. In 2, it is opposition by mockery. The walls were steadily going up, and the people were working with right good will, when Sanballat and Tobiah began to pour scorn and derision upon their efforts. Now, scorn and derision are always very powerful weapons in the devil's hands against the Lord's work. Satan is known as a slanderer of God's people. And in this particular situation, we see how wicked and dangerous the attack was. For in one sense, there was an element of truth in their contemptuous reference to the Jews. They were feeble! They were a captive people lately returned from exile, and there is always an element of low-spiritedness in such a people. What is more, they would almost certainly be conscious of this in themselves, and sensitive about it. The devil knew this, and hit at this particularly sensitive area in their experience. This was the diabolical thing about it.

But there is also something else of a deeper nature here. It is the weak things of the world that God chooses for the accomplishment of His purposes in the world (cf 1 Corinthians 1:27, 28). This is how God's walls are built, and God's work done. They said of Paul in Corinth, His bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible (2 Corinthians 10:10). In one sense it was true (cf 1 Corinthians 2:1-4) - but look what it did in Corinth (cf 1 Corinthians 6:9-11)! This is what we must understand as lying behind these verses. God's work, done in God's way, will never come amiss!

21) 4:4-9

What was said at the end of the previous Note was undoubtedly the basis of the people's steadfastness in face of the ridicule and contempt showered on them. There is a lesson here for us: not to be moved away from our central purpose of restoring the lost heritage of Scotland by any attack of contemptuous men. But there is something else: the people stood firm, and the wall was built! In spite of the contemptuous reference to 'these feeble Jews', what they did was effective. The principle happens to work! But note how it was made to work. It was undergirt by prayer. What a tremendous picture of the spiritual life we are given here! The resolution of the people (6) the practical realism of Nehemiah and his companions ('Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition', 9), the spirit of prayer and dependence on God for everything - this is the way that spiritual battles are won. It would be difficult to find a lesson more needful to be learnt than this, in all Scripture. Let us make it our concern, today, to ponder it well, and work it into our innermost being.

22) 4:10-23

But constant opposition can be very wearing, and discouragement can set in, as it did here. The sheer size of the task that faced them suddenly overwhelmed them (10). This feeling can come quite suddenly, as we well know, and it is a very demoralising and desolating experience, in which nothing seems to be worthwhile any more, and dark despair grips the spirit. It is here that we see something of the worth and stature of Nehemiah, as he rallied his discouraged people. Let us note well how he did this. What had happened was that they had got bogged down with anxious preoccupation with the issues before them -the burden of the work, the amount of rubbish to cope with, the persistence of the enemy, and so on. They had got their eyes off God. And Nehemiah simply directed their thoughts once more to Him. 'Be ye not afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible' (14), and, in 20, 'Our God shall fight for us'. This is one of the most important and critical lessons we can ever learn in spiritual life. It is applicable in all sorts of circumstances different from those unfolded here - applicable indeed whenever and wherever circumstances are likely to overwhelm our spirits and drag us down to despair. 'Look up', it says to us, 'away from the burden, the rubbish, the enemy that is threatening you, to God, the great and terrible. He is all-sufficient, and He will fight for you'. That is the message, and we shall spend more time with it in tomorrow's Note.

23) 4:10-23

The spiritual pattern unfolded in these verses is reflected in the New Testament, in Acts 4:23ff. The apostles had encountered the enemy, with a vengeance. But, undaunted, they went on, because their eyes were upon God, not on the powers of evil around them. They remembered God, the great and terrible - 'Lord, Thou art God...stretch forth Thy hand to heal, and do signs and wonders in the name of Thy holy Child Jesus'. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together.

Nehemiah's summons (14ff) had the desired effect. God brought the counsel of their enemies to nought (15), and the people began to work again with resolution. But there was something else also that served to steel them and give them new courage, as we see in 14. It was the reminder of just how much was at stake in this work. In times of discouragement, we tend to lose sight of the issues, and have no clear vision of how much is at stake. And when we are recalled to a new realisation of this, or see it for the first time, it becomes a source of inspiration and resolution to spur us on. 'The work is great and large' (19).

Just how great and large is the work that faces us in our own day, and how relevant Nehemiah challenge is for us, we shall consider in the next Note.

24) 4:10:23

A press article published on the day this Note is being written speaks of Britain's 'speedy voyage downward', in a situation 'at least potentially revolutionary'. It bears a frighteningly realistic note, and may strike a pang of foreboding and dread into our hearts, as we think of the increasing breakdown of traditional values and old, trusted ways, with distinctions between right and wrong disappearing, and near anarchy rearing its ugly head in many parts of society. One of Boner's hymns (CH 650) begins with the prayer,

Father, our children keep;
we know not what is coming on the earth.

These words breathe the spirit that informs this passage. Do we see today what is at stake, how much is at stake? It is certainly no time for complacency. We must be prepared to fight spiritual battles for our future, our children's future, for the survival of that which we have taken so much for granted in our day. Put at its simplest, we may say this: Scotland in the past stood for godliness and integrity and probity of character, and it was made thus by a pure gospel. Is it not worth fighting resolutely to recover that, and fight with tenacious perseverance, knowing that by prevailing we will be safeguarding our children's future, and laying the foundations of many generations? What Nehemiah is saying to us today is this: 'The future lies in your hands; fight for it now; soon it may be too late'. The trumpet is sounding (20): let all men of goodwill consecrate themselves to this work, and rally together to fight against the forces of evil and disintegration.

25) 5:1-5

This chapter continues the story of opposition against the work of the Lord from a different standpoint. We have seen how the spiritual application of these chapters, and the message of this book for today, is in relation to the building up of the work of God in this land. And one of the important lessons in this connection is that the enemy of God's work, the devil, rings the changes in his attack on God's people, with many and varying approaches to beguile them into his power, and so harm and, if possible, destroy, the work. In the previous chapter, we saw two of these approaches, first ridicule and then discouragement. When both of these failed, the next attack was more subtle - corruption from within. Satan is nothing if not painstaking! It is the fact that constant spiritual principles are portrayed here that explains why we find such a remarkable parallel to this chapter in the events of the Acts of the Apostles which follow upon the reference made to that book in the Note for Sunday, 2nd (Acts 4:23ff). The early history of Acts specially shows the pattern of thrust and counter-thrust in the spiritual warfare of the gospel and the onward march of the Church of God. Each new attack of Satan was turned against him, and became the occasion of a new outpouring of the Spirit, and this in turn seems to have stung the devil into deeper malevolence and cunning. The frontal attack in Acts 4 is followed by the much more subtle attack recorded in Acts 5, in the story of Ananias and Sapphira, in which the essence of the attack was that it was from within, where the earlier had been from without - and therefore most dangerous. When we read this pattern back into Nehemiah's situation, we see exactly what it is that is happening - a demonic attempt to undermine the work by introducing something underground and semi-secret, that gets a good hold before it is exposed as the ugly thing it is. It is in this light that we need to examine the chapter.

26) 5:1-5

The situation was this: it was a time of emergency and crisis, and the resources of the people, financial and material, were strained and stretched to the limit. It was costing them a very great deal to undertake this work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in face of such determined opposition, and all their reserves were being exhausted in the process. Jerusalem was like a city of refugees, with all that that could mean in terms of emergency rations, and so on. And in this situation of emergency, there were those who proved unscrupulous to take advantage of the situation and exploit it for their own base ends, making money out of their brethren and causing extreme hardship among them.

Now, the Old Testament laws did not forbid money-lending, or lending to the poor on a pledge, or even selling oneself, sons and daughters, for money (cf Deuteronomy 15, Leviticus 25:39, Exodus 22:25, etc). But the point of all the Levitical legislation was to stress the compassion of God, and to promote compassionate dealing one with another. And this interpretation of the law here was not only transgressing it by exacting exorbitant interest, but also, in the literal observance of it, was applying it harshly and denying its essence and its merciful intention. More of this in the next Note.

27) 5:1-5

One readily thinks, as an illustration of what was happening here, of the many evidences in wartime of wartime profiteering, within the letter of the law, but shamefully transgressing its spirit. Many people made fortunes out of the war, all within the letter of the law! But it is more to the point to apply the lesson in personal ways, and think of the temptation to heartlessness between brothers that can exist in ordinary daily living. Shakespeare once said:

'Fear to do base unworthy things is valour'

There are any number of base and unworthy things men can do to one another without ever breaking the law or getting into trouble with the police. This is what Christ speaks of in Matthew 5:22-24 - how many acts of social injustice, not answerable at law, fall into this category! One thinks also of 1 John 3:15-18, 'If any one has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love dwell in him?'

For a particular application, let us look ahead to 8, which speaks of 'redeemed brethren' being sold back into bondage, and think of Christ's words in Matthew 18:6, 'Whose shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me....' Someone has suggested the application of these words to 'a broken personality brought slowly along the road to healing and hope by the grace of the gospel; then, through heartlessness, spite, jealousy, greed, vindictiveness, by words of contempt, discouragement or hurt, that half-healed soul is shattered'. What an indictment of human heartlessness! And how eagerly the outside world looks on, and how quick it is to say 'That's your Christian Church for you!'

28) 5:6-13

These verses record Nehemiah's reaction to the injustice. We are told in 7 that he consulted with himself. What was the difficulty for him? This: to take a stand here was likely to alienate some of the most prominent and powerful in the community. What if, alienated, they fell away to Sanballat, and joined the opposition? One has only to mention this to realise how real an issue this is in so many ways today, and how often it is that principle is sacrificed for the sake of expediency and other prudential considerations. All honour to Nehemiah, he stood on principle. The thing was wrong, and therefore to cover it up just for the sake of keeping the support of the wrongdoers was not worthwhile. Whatever the cost, he preferred honourable justice to dishonourable expediency. This is the quality which we mean when we speak of the need for men of principle and integrity in Church and nation, men of probity of character, who will stand by truth even to their hurt. In this case, it paid dividends; but sometimes it causes disaffection and loss. But it is a loss that is counted gain in heaven, with God. And so Nehemiah brought the whole matter out into the open, we doubt not at great cost, and with great courage, and got it settled, bringing to an end, by the power of the Spirit of God, an unhallowed practice in the life of the community. Happy the community that has such a leader and guide!

29) 5:14-19

In these verses we have Nehemiah's personal testimony as to his attitude, which he sets over against that of the interest-charging nobles. As appointed governor, he was entitled to a governor's levy from the people. Why did he forego this? Even if previous governors had made the most of their position, and lined their nests, so to speak, handsomely in the process, Nehemiah was so jealous of God's good name that he took the extreme steps to absolve himself from the charge of filthy lucre. In 15 it is indicated that former governors went to excess, so that even their servants lorded it over the people. Perhaps Nehemiah was conscious of the corrupting power of rights and privileges. At all events he was not prepared to do this - and for this reason: the fear of God. He was, as we say, a God-fearing man. This speaks volumes about him. There are some things he was afraid to do (15). The moral power of fear is a great reality! Psychologists warn against it, as being a disintegrating factor in human experience and human relations, but if we are to accept the testimony of Scripture, fear is not only not disintegrating, but in the best sense an integrating power in human life and behaviour. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the beginning of many other good things also; it is the loss of it in contemporary society that is responsible for so much disorder and corruption.

30) 6:1-9

The theme of this chapter is once again the opposition of the enemies of God against His work and His servants as they sought to build the walls of Jerusalem. Now it is the concentration of the attacks on Nehemiah himself, and the supreme value for us lies in seeing their nature, and the reaction and response Nehemiah makes to them. The proposal made by Sanballat in 2, taken as a proposal, seemed harmless and reasonable enough. But what was to be the point of such a coming together, such a conference? There are two possible constructions that can be placed on the suggestion, and both alike can be faulted. If we put the best construction on it, and take Sanballat's suggestion as proposing a conference about mutual interests, we must still ask, What was there for them to talk about or discuss? These men had no part in the work that was going on in Jerusalem, and they had already been told this (2:20). There was nothing for them to come together in conference about. What decisions could possibly be made in such a situation that would have any relevance? And if the worst construction is put on the situation, then we must see that the proposal was simply a subterfuge to disguise an attempt on Nehemiah's life, rather like that attempted by the Jews on Paul's in Acts 23:12ff. But whichever construction we place upon it, this much was true of either - to have agreed to the proposal would have meant that the work would have come to a standstill. And this was the point. And this is what was abundantly clear to Nehemiah, as we see from his forthright and blunt answer in 3, 'why should the work cease?' We shall turn to the lessons that this points to in the next Note.

31) 6:1-9

The first lesson is this: there are times when conferring between interested parties is a very necessary and often an urgent task; but it is just as certain that such conferences can constitute a complete distraction from the necessary work that is crying out to be done, a hindrance to it, and even a substitute for it. There is something in human nature that loves conferences and committees, the more interminable the better. And how truly they prevent real work being done! The second lesson lies in the fact that Nehemiah got straight to the point, and refused to be distracted. He saw, as many today in the Church do not seem to, that certain things, however plausible or well-meaning, however laudable in themselves, simply get in the way of the work being done, and he refused to have anything to do with them. What a needful discernment for our day, when there are so many things that draw away from the essential work of the gospel. It is time we recognised many of these things as the devil's wiles to draw men away from the essentials. Ecclesiastical preferment and ambition are terrible things when they dull a man's evangelical concern, and turn a love for souls into a flirtatious grasping of carnal power and position. All honour to men who, like Nehemiah, refuse to come down, even when falsely accused of arrogance and pride, and Pharisaism. Well might we remember the scathing indictment of Alexander Frazer of Tain's swords: 'Some men start off as flaming heralds of the everlasting gospel and degenerate into scheming ecclesiastics'!

32) 6:1-9

And of course the accusations do come, as they did to Nehemiah (5-9). The evil reports began to circulate about the work, and threats of messages being sent to the emperor that Nehemiah was exalting himself to be a king and intending to rebel against him. We should note well the pattern: a continuous onslaught against God's appointed leader, in the hope of discouraging and demoralising him. The RSV rendering of 9 is, 'They all wanted to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done''. The opposition was nothing if not single-minded. Satan is not a ditherer, and he does not allow himself to be distracted from the work on hand! How right Nehemiah was to stand firm! cf Ephesians 6:10 ff - 'Stand therefore.... and having done all, stand'. Resist the devil, says James (4:7), and he will flee from you -keep on resisting until he does flee. We must, in the literal sense of the term, be dare-devils - to the uttermost!

33) 6:10-14

Another conference was next suggested to Nehemiah, this time a retreat into the temple, for safety. Again, it sounded so plausible, but again it had as its aim the cessation of the work, and the casting of a real slur on Nehemiah, for if he had yielded to the suggestion, he would have opened himself to the charge of self-preservation and cowardice. Look at the situation: here he was, a man sent by God to do this work, a man called by God. Would God be likely to want him to act in this craven way, to save his own life? 'Such a man as I, called of God as I am? Never. A man is immortal until his work is done. I will not go in!' (11). What follows in 12 is highly significant: 'Lo, I perceived....' So his first intuition was right! Shemiah had put on an act, and he was a traitor in the pay of the enemy. A friend and counsellor of Nehemiah's and yet a fifth-columnist! What must this have cost him in hurt and distress, to realise that a man on whose counsel and friendship he had counted so largely had proved false to him and betrayed his trust! This is one of the most painful of all experiences in Christian work, and enough to discourage the stoutest heart. But it did not deflect Nehemiah from his God-appointed task. His response to the two overtures from the enemy sum up the depth of his consecration: 'I cannot come down' (3) and 'I will not go in' (11). Such was his determination that the work should go on. God give us grace to be as resolute, in the task appointed us!

34) 6:15-19

We should note particularly what is said in 17-19 about the liaison between the nobles of Judah and Sanballat and Tobiah because of family-relationships. Here were men who were involved in the work of rebuilding, yet they were trafficking with the enemy, passing information to Tobiah, to the detriment of the work. What a revelation this is of the real position of these men! We read in 3:4, 30 of this man Meshullam, son of Berechiah (18), and found him taking his position in the building of the wall, and indeed, it would seem, undertaking a double portion, and yet he was a traitor, conniving with Tobiah - deeply in earnest about the building of the wall, yet in secret contact with the enemy! It is a tremendous encouragement to see that even in the context of betrayal and unfaithfulness God's work went on in spite of it all to fruition.

The lessons of this chapter are very relevant for the spiritual life. Perhaps the chief is that we should note just how deeply penetrated the work of God can be with the influence of the evil one, and how very necessary it is for those who would do the Lord's work effectually to be able to discern and 'smell out' the devil's wiles, and expose them, and roundly challenge them in the Lord's name. It is not that the nobles in Nehemiah's day were actively evil, or deliberately seeking to undermine Nehemiah's work it is simply that they were not clear enough in their minds to see what they were doing, and that they thus became the unwitting tools of the devil.

35) 6:15-19

The nobles did not know, and could not see, as Nehemiah clearly saw, just how deadly Sanballat and Tobiah were to the work of God. This is probably the most charitable construction to place on their trafficking with them. But of course, there was also the family interest, and doubtless they were trying to affect some sort of reconciliation, saying or implying to Nehemiah, 'Would it not solve everything if we just let them in a little, and have some cooperation with them. Surely it need not be 'either/or', can it not be 'both/and'?' It was the stark outline of the spiritual issues involved that they failed to see; and this is so often how the work of God can be extensively penetrated by the influence of the evil one. We must learn from this how to discern what things are dangerous to the Church's life, and resolve to have nothing to do with them. Doubtless, it is easy to fall into the extreme error of instituting a witch-hunt, and imagining devilish influences where there are none; but against this we need to remember that in war one can never be too careful, and that it pays to be cautious, and be wary of things that appear suspicious. In the dark and critical days of World War II, it paid to be suspicious of untoward things for one never knew when or where the enemy activity would manifest itself.

Let us learn, then, from this chapter of two great dangers in spiritual life: on the one hand, the danger of being distracted from the essentials by anything whatever, either by the prospect of interesting conferences or by the suggestion to retreat into the temple, or whatever; and on the other, the danger of disaffection within the fellowship, with people facing both ways, working on the walls and at the same time maintaining contact with those whose prime desire is to break these walls down. Know your enemy! And if you sense his presence, do not be talked into believing you are mistaken!

36) 7:1-4

The first section of this long chapter concerns Nehemiah's arrangements for the care and preservation of Jerusalem (the remainder of the chapter being a census list of those who had returned from exile). There are two main points to note in the first four verses. The first relates to the right ordering of the city's life. It has been pointed out that in one very real sense the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, as indeed of the Temple itself, was simply a preparatory work - preparatory to the real functioning of the city and the Temple in the purpose of God. This is of course true of any building - a house is built, not as an exhibit or an ornament, but as a place to live in, and it is the living in it that is the real point of the building, not the completion of the building itself, which is only preparatory to the main function. This is why, after the completion of the building, Nehemiah appointed the singers, the porters and the Levites, and instituted the worship of the place. For this means that the work of God - His purposes in His dealings with this people in the ongoing preparation of redemption - could really continue and be furthered. In other words, a right relation to God was established and maintained.

One is prompted to say that this is the best kind of defence for a city and a people. And in this connection some have made mention of Psalm 27 which is well worth study for the light it sheds on Nehemiah here. The Psalm is in two parts, related together by the common theme of building - building a house and a city, and building a family. In both cases, without the blessing of the Lord, all will be in vain. The Lord must be the Builder, and the Lord must be the Watchman, both of the house and the city and the family. Without Him, all toil and all expenditure of effort will come to grief. This is a principle of wide application, and we shall think more of it in tomorrow's Note.

37) 7:1-4

The principle mentioned in yesterday's Note is surely applicable to our building today, in the Church, in the family, and in individual life. As to the Church, what dangers there are of making the Church an ecclesiastical organisation, run by committees! Organisation, to be true, is necessary, and administration too, but when they 'take over', and 'become' the Church, it is like the outer shell with the kernel missing, and administration becomes the substitute for the quickening power of God. As to the building of the family, one sometimes hears parents speaking - very sincerely and earnestly - of 'doing their best for their family', and of 'giving them the best chance in life'. But what do they mean by that? What are we trying to build in our families? Unless we can bespeak for our children the protection of the living God, and lay a godly foundation in them and for them, all our efforts and aspirations, however earnest, will be in vain, and will come to nothing. It is the vertical dimension that is all-important. This is why it is disquieting to see Christian parents, who will go to almost any lengths in the promotion of social and cultural pursuits for their children, unwilling to accept minor inconvenience or the sacrifice of a little time when it comes to attendance at church or Sunday School. Well, this pays a certain dividend in the fulness of the time, as some have proved to their cost. As to individual life, it is possible to leave God out of what we build, and to carve out a niche for oneself in life, in society, without reference to God. But 'going it alone' in this way is to ask for trouble, and this applies just as much to our jobs, or our personal relationships. Christ is the Lord of all life, and if He is not allowed to be Lord of all, He is not Lord at all. Let us ponder our lives quietly in the light of this challenge. To what area of our experience does it specially apply?

38) 7:1-4

The second point in these four verses, in relation to the right ordering of the city's life and its proper protection, concerns Nehemiah's appointment of his brother Hanani as keeper of the city. It was a dangerous appointment to make, as well as a courageous one. For, of course, it would open him to the accusation of partiality and favouritism. This is an instructive situation. The danger in it lay in the fact that to appoint someone as close to you as your own brother would at least give them impression of favouritism, and we are warned in Scripture to 'abstain from all appearance of evil'. This is always an important consideration in spiritual life: the name and honour of the Lord must be zealously safeguarded in all we say and do. But there are times when the safeguarding of the work is so important that one has to risk the possibility of misunderstanding and being misunderstood - for the higher good. And all honour to Nehemiah that he should have seen the issue so clearly, and that he had the courage to do the difficult, and it may be, unpopular, thing so unhesitatingly and so unflinchingly.

We saw at the end of chapter 5 how Nehemiah's conduct was shaped and conditioned by the fear of the Lord (5:15). This is precisely the ground on which he chose his brother as the keeper of Jerusalem: Hanani was a faithful man, and 'feared God above many'. Nehemiah had already proved that his own fear of the Lord had been, not only honouring to God, but practically a most valuable asset, giving him wisdom and discernment and a basic clarity and simplicity of purpose that paid dividends so far as getting work done was concerned. And this is what he wanted for the continuing of the work. He knew the dangers, the hazards, and the temptations involved in public position, and knew that only a man who was under the restraint and authority of God could sustain such a position without coming to grief. More of this tomorrow.

39) 7:1-4

'A faithful man, and one that feared God above many' - the two things go together.

It is the fear of God that makes men faithful and trustworthy, and safe for public life. How is this? Two things may be said: one is that, to know God - the all holy One, of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, to know that He demands inflexible standards of probity and integrity, to know Him as the sovereign Lord, is to have a restraint put upon one's behaviour and even thoughts. It is to make one conscious that at any cost, even unto hurt or life itself, His standards must be maintained. They say that in public life every man has his price, but the man who fears God more than he fears the face of man is a man who cannot be bought. You are safe with him, he is utterly trustworthy; he will never do anything dishonourable, or depart from principle on the grounds of expediency. The second thing that may be said is that such a man, being under the authority of the fear of God, carries authority (cf Luke 7:1-10; 'I also am a man set under authority.... and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth....'). Look at Nehemiah himself! What authority the man had! He strides through this whole book with an unmistakeable air of quiet authority. He was God's man for the hour, indeed!

This is one influence the Church can have on public life today: the production of men who fear God, men who will take their place and play their part in society. Let this be our continuing prayer!

40) 7:5-73

We come in these verses to another very long list of names, which we must assume bear their own lesson for us, since the Holy Spirit records nothing in vain. We should notice in the first place that Nehemiah says that God put it into his heart to 'beckon' or 'number' the people. It is this that indicates something of the point of the exercise, especially when we remember what is said in 4. We see, first of all, in 5, that Nehemiah found this register, which he gives us in 6-73. This, in fact, is the list given us in Ezra 2 (which see), with only one or two minor differences in names and numbers, which may well be accounted for by errors in transcribing and transmission. The two lists are practically the same. When we studied Ezra 2, the lessons we underlined were these: (i) it was a mere remnant that returned from Babylon, not the whole captive people; and (ii) the Levites, the very ones one would have expected to be in the forefront of such an enterprise, were very conspicuous by their absence.

Two reasons have been suggested for the compilation or repetition of this census list. One is that the city was large and great (4), and the people few, and this was therefore a muster of all available people to bring them in from various scattered places and groups into the city, that they might take their rightful place in the work. 'Many of them were detached and remote, and Nehemiah wanted them truly integrated so that they might have, and might know they had, a stake in the work' (George Philip). In this sense it was better to be a little fish in a big pool, than a big fish in a little pool. Unity is strength, and there are very few cities, from the spiritual point of view, that are so strong as to be able to afford a dissipation of their available forces. And - note well! - it was God Who put this into Nehemiah's heart!

41) 7:5-73

The other reason suggested for repetition of the census list would seem to have been to ensure that only pure Jews, especially amongst the priests (64, 65) should be found in this work that belonged to God. We have already seen more than once how Nehemiah has sought to hedge off the work from intruders (cf 2:20), and certainly there were plenty evidences of filth-column activities within the work itself, as we saw in the previous chapter. This is an important consideration in two ways. For one thing, we have already spoken of the possibility of people coveting places in the work of God, and of how Nehemiah had to run the risk of being misunderstood by men who may have wanted places in the work. Here, it is as if Nehemiah were saying, 'Prove your right to a place at the heart of God's work, and it will be yours' (G. Philip). And how to do this? By showing that at heart we are at one with the work. Do not let us forget that some who were involved in the work were also trafficking with the enemy. Had such people a right to be in the forefront? Did they not by their actions and attitude, exclude and disqualify themselves? For another thing, here is a list of names of men and women who are to be included in the city of God. Taken at its simplest - and this is surely one lesson from all genealogies - it asks us the question, 'Are our names written in the book of God? Have we a place in the city of Zion?' After all, Jesus did say, 'Rejoice not that the devils are subject unto, but rejoice rather in this, that your names are written in heaven.'

42) 8:1-2

The first seven chapters of Nehemiah are recorded in the first person. Now, at chapter 8, there is a change to the third person. Nehemiah, for the time being, fades from the picture, and Ezra once more becomes prominent. The record we have here and in the next two chapters is of spiritual, biblical ministry, and of the profound impact it had upon the people. The change from Nehemiah to Ezra at this particular point carries its own message, for it is a change which coincides with the change from building up the walls of Jerusalem to building up the people of God, from the work of the layman to that of the scribe. This is significant. One charge that could have been laid against Nehemiah by his enemies in the previous chapters (and it was, cf 6:7!) was that he was exalting himself too highly, and taking on himself almost godlike powers (how easy it is to impute false and unworthy motives to a man who has seen what God wants him to do, and does it with all his might!). But here he is, standing aside in favour of another man, refusing to intrude into an office that was not his, but giving those duly appointed by God for the preaching of the Word their rightful place and function. Nehemiah was a godly man; he was doubtless mighty in the Scriptures, and could have helped many; but he also knew that was not his Job, and therefore he did not covet the position that belonged to others. This is a distinction that is continued in the New Testament also. True the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is a glorious reality there, but this does not mean, and should not be confused with, the 'ministry of all believers'. God has appointed some, not all, to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers; and this is a distinction that is meant to be taken seriously (Ephesians 4:8ff). Earlier in our Notes (chapter 3) we were emphasising the idea of differentiation of function (members in particular'), and here we have a practical expression of it.

43) 8:1-2

There is something else that must be clarified before we go much further. It is this: the predominant emphasis throughout the chapter is on 'the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel'. Here, it is rather important that we should understand the meaning of the 'law' aright. 'The law' in the Old Testament has an ambiguous character, in the sense that it could be, and was, interpreted in different ways, in a legalistic or in a gracious way 'This do and thou shalt live' was exalted into a righteousness by works, and there is no doubt that this is how the law was regarded and interpreted in Old Testament times, and in the time of our Lord also, by the Pharisees (and in our own time too!). But this is to misunderstand the Old Testament revelation, which is, essentially, one of grace. The real contrast between the Old and New Testaments is not that of law and grace, but of promise and fulfilment. And it is the law in this latter, fullest sense that was declared here by Ezra, and which wrought so powerfully and deeply in the lives of the people. This is not to say that the law is never spoken of in the other, more restricted sense. We may think, for example, of the apparent contrast between the statement in Psalm 19, 'The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul', and Hebrews 7:19, 'The law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did, by the which we draw nigh to God'. Clearly, the law is being used in two very different senses in these two references. It may surely be said that where spiritual renewal takes place, it is the law as a gracious thing, an expression of the grace of God that is at work.

44) 8:1-8

Now to go on. It will be recalled from the last chapter that Nehemiah mustered all the available people to Jerusalem for the proper protection of the city. What we read now follows from that, as the next step. The gathered assembly requested through their rulers that Ezra should fetch the book of the Law of Moses and publicly read it. The godly commentator Delitzsch says that 'the motive for this request is undoubtedly to be found in the desire of the congregation to keep the new moon of the seventh month as a feast of thanksgiving for the gracious assistance they had received from the Lord during the building of the wall, and through which it had been speedily and successfully completed, in spite of the attempts of their enemies to obstruct the work. This feeling of thankfulness impelled them to the hearing of the word of God for the purpose of making His law their rule of life'. This may well be so; there must surely have been a glow of thankfulness to God for seeing them through to victory in the work of rebuilding. If so, we can see the wonderful providence of God at work, guiding them to the Word, and prompting them to desire it. This is always how a spiritual work begins - with a rediscovery of the Word of God, and a renewed desire to hear its message. One recalls how it was in the dark days before the Exile, in King Josiah's reign - the book of the law was discovered in the temple, and that was the beginning of a national renewal and reformation which was the only bright gleam in the darkness of the pre-exilic declension. In the light of this, is it surprising that we should begin to hope, when we see men beginning to seek after the Word of God in our time?

45) 8:1-8

There is a certain humour nevertheless in this matter. Let us suppose that the interpretation in the previous Note is the right one, and that the people truly desired to hear the Word, and order their lives by it. But did they really know what they were taking on? For there were many surprises to follow, as they learned and realised what opening their lives to the Word of life meant and involved for them. This is always a critical point. It is one thing to want the Word of God, and to ask one's leaders to give it; it is quite another thing to be prepared for all its challenge and discipline when it is given. The two attitudes do not necessarily coincide. One thinks of the common people's attitude to Christ. At first, when they heard him, they said, 'Never man spake as this Man', and flocked to hear Him. But later, when they really understood what He was saying, and what His words implied, many walked no more with Him, being offended at His sayings. We well recall what an elder once said to a new minister, 'We want you to teach us what the Bible says', and with what high hopes that man of God set about preaching the Word, and what disappointment followed, when bitter opposition began to raise its head! Ah, it is easy to protest a love and desire for the word of God, but it is the reaction when the Word is given that is the real test. One learns over the years to keep one's counsel and reserve one's judgment when people gush about the preaching and the ministry. The real test is what attitude they will be taking in six or twelve months' time. Some folk are easily satisfied!

46) 8:9-12

We should pay particular heed to the emphasis in 8, 12 and 13. 'Distinctly', or 'clearly', probably refers not so much to 'elocution' as to the understanding. The RSV margin renders it 'with interpretation'. We could therefore read thus: 'They read from the law with interpretation (or, interpreting as they read)' i.e. they gave the sense, so that the people understood. This is the true function of ministry - to open up the Scriptures (cf Luke 24:27, 32, 45). There is a philosophy behind this: it is that the Scriptures are the living Word of God, and that when they are understood by the mind and heart they exercise a dynamic influence upon life. This means that, basically, we must depend on the truth of God itself in our work, depend on it to do its own life-giving work, and trust in its power to do so. One recalls James Denney's striking words in this connection: speaking of the simplicity of our Lord's ministry, he says, 'How little He had of all that churches are tempted to trust in now! How little there is in the Gospels about methods and apparatus. The trust of the Church in other things is really a distrust of the truth, an unwillingness to believe that its power lies in itself, a desire to have something more irresistible than truth to plead truth's cause; and these are all modes of atheism.'

This, then, is the need, and this is the way: we must subject people to the Word of life, give them the Scriptures, teach them, open them up, giving the understanding, and trust that the power of the Word will eventually ignite men's hearts, as it assuredly did here!

47) 8:9-18

We see from these verses something of the effect of such a ministry. The first thing that the living word of God does is to convict of sin, and create a sense of unworthiness, as we see and experience the meaning of living religion, and realise how very far short of this we fall. The impact the living truth has upon us is that it shows us up, and rebukes us. It is little wonder that the people wept! But that is only the preparatory work of the Word, rather than its proper and essential work. The words in 9, 10, 'Mourn not, nor weep.... neither be ye sorry' and in 17, 'and there was a very great gladness' bear witness to something blessedly different. We can hardly think that Nehemiah and the Levites simply hushed the people's awakened consciences, to turn their sorrow into joy. Rather, it was that, shining through the very word that had convicted them was the rich heart of it which proclaimed that there was forgiveness and grace in the God of the Word, to renew them and make them all that they should be. It was surely this that they understood, and that made them rejoice (cf Isaiah 6, with the vision of the Lord bringing terrible conviction of sin - 'Woe is me, for I am undone' - then the word of cleansing - 'Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thine iniquity is taken away and thy sin purged'. Ah, the one power does not come without the other, when it is God Who is at work. We have not understood the living, scarifying Word of God aright if all we have found in it is condemnation).

48) 8:9-18

We should note the sequence in 10 - 'eat.... drink.... send'. Here is the true expression of spiritual joy, the outward reference of grace, the outgoing of the heart to those in need. In spiritual terms this can be translated thus: the people were sent off to partake of a feast, and true Christian experience is analogous to a feast, it is associated with rejoicing - a glorious, highly infectious rejoicing and gladness. Isaiah tells us (35:10) that 'the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads'. Then sharing it with others! As Christians we have the treasure of the gospel both to rejoice in and to share with others, and we must believe that God will be our enabling as we seek to do so. In all conscience, there are many for whom nothing is prepared. As we read these words today, let us ponder the fact that before many hours have passed, we may well have brushed shoulders with someone for whom no one has ever prayed, and who has never at any time had any spiritual influence brought to bear upon his life. And God has brought him across our path because He has given us something we can share with him. We heard of a Christian who flew across the Atlantic, and had prayed before embarking that his life might tell for Christ. All seventy of his fellow-passengers slept most of the way, but he got into conversation with the air-hostess, and before reaching his destination had led her to Christ! Those for whom nothing is prepared! And could not this happen also on the bus, going home from church on Sunday?

49) 8:9-18

One further point should be noted before we leave this chapter. In 13, we read that the people gathered together to 'understand' - or, as the RSV puts it, to study - the words of the law. The latter rendering underlines an important distinction. What it means is that the people came together to think out the implications of God's Word. It was not a matter of studying as an interesting and stimulating exercise, but of the production of a genuine and humble desire to learn God's will and to do it. This is the point. It is the determination to allow one's life to be shaped by the Word and will of God. It was in fulfilment of this resolve that the people proceeded to observe the feast of tabernacles. Here was something enjoined in God's Word, which they realised they were not doing, and they said, 'God has spoken to us, and the logical thing to do is to start doing it'. The 'living in booths' (16ff) was a conscious attempt on their part to be what God had made them - that is, a redeemed people, a pilgrim people, obedient to the Lord. Obedience is the keynote. They began to live by the Word. To take this seriously would surely mean that our lives would very soon be revolutionised. But if we were prepared to be obedient, the moral transformation would be followed by the joy that the people experienced in Ezra's day. And where gladness and joy are manifest, those outside begin to take notice and ask questions. It is the overflow of the joy of the Lord in a believer's heart and life that woos and evangelises others, those for whom nothing is prepared. That is the portion that is 'sent' to them.

50) 9:1-6

This is truly a remarkable chapter! It is one of several passages of Scripture (cf also Pss 105, 106) which give us an inspired commentary on Old Testament history, and this is one of its unique values for us. The first thing we have to notice is that this great confession was the result of the ministry of the Word in 8:1-9:3, and issued from it. There is a sense in which this is the whole of the lesson of the chapter, and says everything of final importance in it. For a rediscovery of the Word means a rediscovery of God, and this is what happened here. The returned exiles discovered what a great and wonderful God they had, as they rehearsed His mighty acts in their history, from its beginning in the call of Abraham until their own time.

This in itself is a testimony to the worth and quality of Ezra's ministry among them. For, clearly, he read and expounded the law in such a way as to make its message come alive, and come out of the Scriptures in which it was enshrined, and confront men inescapably with the awesome presence of the living God. He made the Word sound as it really is, a glorious, vital and revitalising agency in the lives of men. What is more - and this may be said by implication - he ministered in such a way as to make men see the point and purpose of God in His choosing of Abraham and this people. There is a new awareness in their consciousness of the ongoing work of God, and His purpose of redemption, and of their own part in it, the part they were to play, in their own history. This is tremendously important. So often, men do not see the wood for the trees; so often, we who study the history of these times do not even see, from our perspective of distance, the meaning and point of God's dealings with His people, or discern the unifying aim throughout the whole story. But sometimes, in the welter of different material and different experiences it suddenly becomes clear to us, and we see what God is about, and see also what our part in His work is - and we marvel, and stand in awe at the greatness of God.

51) 9:7-15

Let us look, then, at what the people discovered about God. They saw, first of all, that He was an electing God (7), a God Who chose men, Who singled out Abraham in sovereign grace for a purpose and a destiny; that He was a covenanting God (8), and a faithful God, One Who 'haste performed Thy words'. He is a God, they realised, who does what He says He will do. Does not the evidence of this in the Scriptures give us confidence that what He has said to us He will do also? In our burden of prayer, and in our times alone with God, do we feel that He has whispered to us, 'Fear not, I will do this, in answer to your prayer?' Shall we not take this assurance, then, and have quiet confidence in Him that, as He has promised, so He will perform?

Then, in 9-11, they saw Him to be a wonder-working God, making bare His holy arm on the behalf of His people, waxing mighty for them against their enemies; leading them (12) as the God of the pillar of cloud and fire, legislating for them (13) at Sinai, providing bountifully for all their needs (15) in their wilderness journeyings. One senses the thrill of exultation as they rehearsed their history before God. In all this we should notice something very significant. This is an act of confession on the part of God's people, yet the predominant consciousness is not so much of their sin, as of the greatness of God. They are overwhelmed by that greatness. This is the truly authentic note in spiritual life; and it is the ground of all hope, making this kind of discovery about God. It is open to question, on scriptural grounds, whether a prolonged bewailing of one's sinfulness and a preoccupation with one's worthlessness and depravity, which characterise the lives of some believers, are marks of true spiritual experience. It is possible to be morbidly taken up with sin. It is remarkable to see in the New Testament how little preoccupied with sin the Apostle Paul was. His eyes were turned upwards, on the greatness of God and the unsearchable riches of Christ. This is a more health-giving attitude of confession than the other.

52) 9:16-30

Alongside the revelation of the greatness and majesty of God, there came a consciousness of the perversity of human sin. This is not to contradict what was said at the end of the previous Note, for of course there is a healthy - and necessary - acknowledgement of sin, which God intends should lead to repentance and forsaking of it. It is this that we see in these verses. From 16 onwards there is a series of 'But's' and 'nevertheless's' which stand over against the mighty acts of God in redeeming His people - the rebellion in the wilderness against Moses (17), the molten calf (18), disobedience in the time of Joshua and Judges (26), evil from the time of David to the Captivity (28-30). One recalls another panoramic view of the Old Testament history given us in the New Testament, very similar to this - the great utterance by Stephen in Acts 7 before the Jewish Sanhedrin in which he summed up the history of this perverse people in the words, 'Ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye'. What a history of constant, repeated rebellion and backsliding! Now, the point here in these verses is that Ezra and the Levites are seeing that they are part of this process: it was not something that had occurred in history long ago, only; it was something that repeated itself, again and again - and was true also of them. They themselves were involved in it (as we see from 32-37). This also is something that we learn when we study the Word, and submit ourselves to its teaching.

53) 9:16-30

Even in their realisation and consciousness of the perversity of God's people down their long history, however, this still does not become the predominant consciousness of the chapter. Over against that perversity there is the amazing discovery that their wonder-working God, the God of majesty and power, is also a God of infinite longsuffering and patience. We should look long at 17, 19-21, 22-25, 27, 28, 30-31. The message comes over loud and clear of the unaccountable patience and longsuffering of God! Against all human expectation, and all laws of ordinary probability, God's love for them proved a love that no sin could weary or exhaust. It would not let them go! Grace for sinners, for the unworthy, for those who fail, for those who rebel -this is the glorious message! But this certainly does not mean an amiable weakness on God's part. He would not let them go, it is true; but He did not let them off either! For one thing, He delivered them over to their enemies (27, 28, 30). And His love for them was strong enough to resist pity for them until discipline and grief had done their gracious work in them. For another thing, He sent leanness upon them, as we see in 32ff. where the contrast between what their experience could have been by the goodness of God and what it actually was because of their continued rebellion is underlined. One thinks of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 3, in the words 'They shall suffer loss' - this is true here as well as hereafter ; and we get no encouragement in Scripture to believe that because God forgives, things can be all the same as before. There is a price to be paid for sin. Forgiveness of itself does not wipe out the consequences of sin or its entail. David was forgiven his sin in the matter of Bathsheba, but the evil consequences of that sin dogged him to his dying day. It is possible to become 'disqualified' (1 Corinthians 9:27) by continued sin and carelessness. We may not presume on the grace of God.

54) 9:31-38

One final lesson may be underlined before leaving the chapter. In view of all this - and surely some consciousness of this had come home to the people - there must have come an awareness of the need to renew covenant with God, to consecrate themselves anew to Him - to hide in Him from the weakness and waywardness of their natures, lest they should fall away again and come to grief. The words 'because of all this' in 38 are very eloquent in this connection. Their concern would be lest they miss out in God's glorious purposes for them, and so frustrate His grace in their lives.

It will be useful to look back now over the meaning of the chapter and see it as a whole. The people have heard the Word, they have been given a revelation of the greatness and majesty of their God, and His unaccountable longsuffering in face of repeated rebellions and backslidings down their history. And they are moved, both by the wonder of His love, and by the dark and sinister possibilities within themselves, to take steps to consecrate themselves to Him by a solemn covenant. The use of this Scripture for us is surely obvious. Does it help us to see our own hearts? Do we see afresh the faithfulness of God, and His longsuffering towards us? And shall we not do as they did, and covenant afresh with God, in consecration and new obedience?

55) 10:1-27

This chapter gives us the details of those who signed the covenant mentioned in 9:38, and the details of the nature of that covenant. Its first lesson therefore carries over from the previous chapter. It was, as we said, the contrast between what they were and what they might have been but for their sin - and indeed what they might again fall into because of the known perversity of their hearts - that constrained them to enter a fresh covenant with God. That is to say, it was for safety. What we must recognise is that this is not a place that we ever graduate from. As long as the marks of the plague of sin are upon our lives - and that will be to our life's end - there will always be the possibility of falling back, and therefore there will always be the need to be renewing our covenant with God, keeping short accounts with Him. It may be thought that this would be more true of some than of others - it is more obviously true of some than of others, as for example those who are conscious of the kind of weakness and perversity of heart that can be merciless on its victims, and in whom constant vigilance is the only thing that can prevent glaring crashes and disasters. But, of course, it is true of all - it is not only glaring and obvious crashes that betoken a falling away from God - there is the dullness of spirit that is never marked by moral failure, the lack of care or concern for the things of God, the coldness of heart - ah, in how many ways are believers betrayed into unfaithfulness! And here is the only antidote and safeguard.

56) 10:1-27

In connection with what was said in the previous Note, another lesson lies in the fact that the people subscribed their names to the covenant, so that it was all public, and everybody knew where the other stood. There is something very important in this. It is, of course, possible to consecrate oneself to the Lord in all sincerity, very quietly, without anybody knowing, and it can be a very genuine consecration indeed. Nevertheless, it is true that making it known, either by public testimony, or by writing, as here, or by any other method, puts an unmistakable seal to it. For it means burning one's boats, and being unable to retreat or withdraw. It is nailing one's colours to the mast, for all to see; it is public committal.

This is one of the things that Romans 10:8ff means - 'With the mouth confession is made unto salvation' (cf also Psalm 107:2, 'Let the redeemed of the Lord say so'). One thinks also in this connection of Christ's gentle but firm drawing out into the open of the woman with the issue of blood. She would still have been healed, even if she had slipped quietly away to her home. But Christ knew that something vital would have been lacking if she had; and He drew her out into the open. And we, who do not know our own hearts as He does, are all the better of making it public when we consecrate ourselves to Him - for our safety! It will help us to keep straight, to know that others know we have renewed our covenant with God.

57) 10:28-31

The verses which follow describe the nature of the covenant. This we deal with in two parts, which are definitive in all forms of consecration to God. The people separated themselves from sin, and unto God. The first is seen in 28-31, the second in 32-39.

First of all, then, the negative separation. From this point of view the covenant was as follows:

(i) The people of God separated themselves from the people of the land and took their stand as 'a people for God's own possession':

(ii) They refused inter-marriage with the heathen;

(iii) They refused any Sabbath trading. All this is significant. On the one hand, this negative emphasis had the effect of restoring Israel to her true calling as a separate people, distinct and distinctive, to be a witness for God among the Gentiles. There is necessarily a negative, even a puritanical, note in all this, and we do well to notice it. Puritanism, in the ethical sense (as distinct from the theological) is not in great favour today. Historically, there has been a great reaction against it, because of a wrong and unattractive narrowness that developed from it, and all sorts of people have been at pains to assert that Christianity is not a negative religion - 'You mustn't do this, you mustn't do that' - but gloriously positive. But two wrongs do not make a right, and this swing to the opposite extreme is just as harmful and misleading and destructive of true, biblical Christianity. It needs to be stressed again today that there is a negative side to true, biblical faith. There are some things a Christian may not do, dare not do. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

58) 10:28-31

To continue the thought in the previous Note, the observation may be made that one has rarely known of a man really used of God in blessing to souls who did not have at the heart of his experience a very narrow, negative factor in this sense. The man God blesses is not your broad, genial, free-living, liberty-loving believer, but the iron-willed disciplinarian and puritan, of whom it could certainly be said that there are certain things he does not do, certain places he will not go. The trouble today is that so many believers do not appear to be very different in any way from those of the world. 'In the world, but not of the world' is the true pattern, but many seem to be in it and of it too. The world is waiting for - it is certainly needing to see - a clear-cut and unequivocal testimony of 'differentness'. Away, then, with so much bending over backwards to save the world embarrassment about this division that God has made between us!

59) 10:28-31

Two particular instances are given here. The first is marriage, the second the Sabbath. In both there is the need for 'differentness'; and it is only by shutting one's eyes to the essential nature of one's calling as a believer that one can suppose that compromise in either will not matter very much. Paul takes up the marriage issue in 2 Corinthians 6:14, 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers'. Could anything be clearer, more unequivocal? Yet one will always get someone who will somehow believe that his or her case will prove the exception, that it will be different. Experience, however, sadly proves the contrary.

As to the Sabbath, we should learn that the attack on the Sabbath today is deeply significant. In the 19th century, it was the attack on the Word of God; now it is the attack on His Day. And both are symptomatic of revolt against Him. This is why a return to Him leads to the honouring of His Day. And why should we hesitate to be different here? And why should we be so afraid of the spectre of legalism? To be sure, there is a legalistic observance of the Lord's Day - every evangelical duty can be twisted into a legalistic observance - but there is a true, liberating use of it also, which marks the believer as one who stands on principle and refuses to stoop to expediency or prudential considerations. Let us not be afraid of negative testimony. Let us be like Nehemiah, who refused to 'come down!'

60) 10:32-39

Here is the positive side of the believer's separation, and it exists in proportion as the negative side exists alongside. The latter makes room for the former, for if the believer is so immersed in the things of the world, there just will not be time for all the positive things in the kingdom of God. The first thing we notice here is the wide variety of work associated with the house of God - service (32), work (33), altar-service (34), first fruits (35). There is an unlimited variety of expression possible for redeemed personalities in the will of God. Not that this means 'living' in the Church, as such, and this is not the lesson to be gathered here. Rather, it is that this is the new centre of life for us, and everything we do is related to it. In this connection we may recall, in our studies in the Lord's Prayer, how we found that requests for daily needs were very few - bread, forgiveness, victory; and we suggested that when the first part of the prayer is fulfilled in us - Hallowed be Thy Name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done - life becomes tremendously simplified, and unified, and positive. So it is here. This is the new centre of life:

Now rest, my long divided heart;
fixed on this blissful centre, rest!
O who with earth would grudge to part,
when called with angels to be blest?

The trouble is, we are just not prepared to allow God to do this kind of work in us, to make us so 'one-track' that with Paul we can say, 'This one thing I do'.

61) 10-32-39

One final word, before we leave this chapter. There is a phrase in 34 which thrusts itself upon us as an inexorable challenge. Nehemiah speaks of casting lots 'to burn upon the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the law'. This is our task, as men and women consecrated to the Lord, to keep the altar fires burning for the work and service of His house. How are to do this? How indeed, except by prayer. We would like to place it once again on record that we regard participation in the corporate prayer-life of God's people - in our congregation and indeed in any congregation - as the touchstone, the divinely appointed touchstone, of spiritual health and dedication. We do not, and cannot, with the best will in the world, believe that a man is consecrated to Jesus Christ who persistently absents himself without just cause from the prayer meeting. It is a source of mystification and distress that there should be many whom we love and respect and esteem in the Lord who withhold themselves, for whatever reason, from this committal. How can we do other than regard them as being unfaithful to the highest they know, when this is the only way that the altar fires of God can be kept burning in our fellowship. We have been reading a chapter that deals with consecration and nailing one's colours to the mast and writing names down. Is not this, then, a good time, and does not this give us an opportunity to show that we are in earnest about the things of God?

62) 11:1-2

This chapter has a twofold connection with what has gone before. On the one hand, what we read here about the re-peopling of Jerusalem links directly with 7:4, 5, which told of Nehemiah's concern to muster all available people to bring them into the city, to take their rightful place in the work. In point of time, what we read of here is the sequel to that. But in between, there has been the solemn feast, the reading of the law, and the consecration of the people. And now, so to speak, we are ready for the fulfilment of what Nehemiah believed God had put into his heart (7:5).

On the other hand, what happened here flowered naturally and inevitably from the covenant into which the people entered with their God. It was the expression of their consecration and dedication to the Lord. This, then, bears its message to us at the outset. Let us see the pattern unfolding. Nehemiah has a conviction in his heart, given as he believes by God, concerning Jerusalem, that God has a purpose of blessing, and that such and such is to be done. And before it is done -and, we may say, before it can be done and fulfilled - a deep and searching work is wrought in the hearts of the people, and a new consecration takes place, and a new covenant entered into.

If we believe that God has laid His hand on us for a work of blessing, will the road to its fulfilment not be a similar searching work of God's Spirit in the hearts of His people, in which they are sifted, convicted, cleansed and renewed by the Word - then the fulfilment of the work? And does not this serve to explain much in our pilgrimage? Ah, let us not refuse the word of exhortation, but rather allow it to do all God's will in us, that His sovereign purposes might be furthered and accomplished!

63) 11:1-2

Nehemiah's plan to re-people the city became the point at issue so far as the new covenant was concerned. Here was an opportunity to show that their dedication was real, and could be given practical expression. The 'consecration question', 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' is answered thus: 'I want you to dwell in Jerusalem, and take your due burden of responsibility and danger there'. When we look at the situation more closely, we see that Nehemiah is asking of them that their consecration be real. It was a challenge to them to be at the heart of the work, in Jerusalem, where all the pressures were felt, and all the attacks by Sanballat and Tobiah were made. Sympathy with the work was not enough: participation was essential. It was the challenge of a total demand laid upon them.

And the evidence is that there was a great response. We are told that lots were cast, to choose one in ten for residence in Jerusalem. At first reading this might seem to suggest that it was the unlucky ones who were chosen; but second thoughts will show that all were willing to have their names put in the lot. Thus, in principle, all were willing to go, if chosen. In fact, some interpret it to mean that so many volunteered to be in Jerusalem that they had to cast lots for the privilege! We are told that the people blessed all those that willingly offered to dwell in Jerusalem! Willing offering! Voluntary service! What a heartening sight! For it was a task involving great responsibility, and doubtless much sacrifice. Yet so many rose to it. This is the fruit of the incisive ministry of Ezra and the Levites in the Word of God. This is what it produced.

64) 11:19

In view of the quality of consecration evidenced here, we may well ask ourselves whether we do not make the Christian life too easy, too undemanding today. Have we not taken the challenge out of the Faith? Why should we set a standard that is so very far below the New Testament standard for Christian discipleship?

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

There is no lessening of this demand! The gospel makes a total demand, and anyone who thinks the New Testament does not make this clear has not read it properly. This, it may be, has a particular thrust for young people. How wrong we older folk often are to be so concerned about 'having things for the young'. We do them harm in this, for in padding and cossetting them, we are neutralising the effect that the thoroughgoing challenge of the gospel can have on them. It is the inspiration of a total demand that will fire the young, if they have got any spunk in them at all. For lack of this challenge they go drooling after the stars of Juke Box Jury, with all their mental and emotional energies drained off them into aimless, second hand living, when they could be living heroically and sacrificially on the highest levels of life. It is true that many could not take this; they do not have the courage to be Christians, to stand against the stream, they are afraid to be different from the crowd. But some could take it, only they are not being given the chance. Well, here it is: the gospel has nothing to offer but Christ, and a cross and a life of self-denial, with many crucifixions; a life that demands all that there is of us. But to rise to that challenge will mean a certain quality of life that will do something, that will get to places that will leave an enduring mark. This is the kind of challenge Nehemiah put before the people.

65) 11:3-19

In these verses we are told something about the sort of people who dwelt in Jerusalem: leading laymen (3-9), priests (10-14), Levites (15-18), porters (19). A simple lesson emerges immediately: it is the variety in the numbers of those who responded for this responsible work. There is something very important for us here. In the New Testament Church, according to the teaching on the Church given there, Christ bestowed His gifts upon His people according to the measure of the gift of the Spirit; and the New Testament Church was a well-equipped church, with members functioning smoothly in playing each his particular part in the life of the body. In a living Church, where Christ is reigning, and the Spirit is having His way, He will bestow varying gifts. There will be varying ministries within the Body, all complementary, all contributing to the well-being of the Body. We should expect this. In any fellowship that is a real fellowship, people will be raised up for various tasks, whether ministry, teaching, administration, pastoral counsel, 'helps', 'governments' and suchlike (of 1 Corinthians 12:27ff). It has indeed been one of the joys in the development of our own work that, as new ventures have been initiated, as for example the printing of the Notes, the preparation of tapes, to mention but two, the Lord has provided people with the particular gifts needed for the faithful and worthy fulfilment of such tasks. Should this not encourage us to believe that, when other needs arise, provision will be made?

66) 11:20-24

There is a highly significant point to note in this passage. We are told that it was the king's command that 'a portion should be for the singers' (23). The king is not David, or any of the kings of Judah, and the reference is not to any former legislation made by him; it is Artaxerxes, king of Persia, and what we are being told is that God put it in the heart of Artaxerxes to supply help here. It may well be that he did not appreciate the significance of what he was doing - perhaps he may even have done it as a whim but we cannot doubt but that God was behind it, for He saw that the worship of His House at Jerusalem was of central importance, and He was determined to see that it would be kept in due order. And how important this is today! The quality of praise in a congregation is very revealing. You can tell the spiritual tone of a people by their singing! In Ephesians 1:3, the word Paul uses in the phrase 'blessed be God' means 'Speak well of God', and this is the essence of praise and worship. It is easy to see when a congregation is truly speaking well of God in its worship, and when it is not, for when it is not, there is a dullness, a flatness in the singing, which no amount of musical correctness or sophistication or expertise can conceal. When a people are really entering into the spirit of worship there is something indefinable but unmistakable in that worship that lifts the souls of men to the very throne of God. This is where real and meaningful participation in worship needs to take place - far, far more than individuals reading the lesson or suchlike. It is the same with prayer. It is not a matter of one man praying and the rest of the congregation listening (or in preaching, one man speaking and the others listening), but of one man praying as the representative of the people, and carrying the people with him. When this takes place, something happens: God comes down in the midst, to bless and meet with His people. Is this how we think of worship?

67) 11:25-36

The final verses of the chapter tell of the inhabiting and re-peopling of the rest of the land by the others. The question arises. How could they have had such freedom in so doing, in face of the continuing active opposition of Sanballat and the others? Does it not seem strange that the enemy should have allowed this to happen? The answer lies in this: Nehemiah concentrated on a strong central citadel, Jerusalem, established and fortified; and because of that strong central citadel which the enemy could not breach, it spelt safety for all around, and affected the whole of the rest of the land. Therein lies the lesson for us. In spiritual terms, if we are able to keep the central citadel of the faith and the Church strong and vital, and establish the work there, the peripherals will be attended to, and looked after automatically.

At the time when we studied Nehemiah in our morning services some years ago, the Biafran war was at its height. One former missionary in that land, the Rev. H.A.G. Tait of Crieff wrote the following:

'For years out there we appeared to be hopelessly preoccupied with the pursuit of church union. The cry to unite seemed almost to drown the cry to believe, and the Church shed its Confession of Faith in readiness for the plunge. What one wonders is how people fed on a wearisome diet of sermons about the ecumenical movement will have stood up to the fierce trial of famine and sword. What happens to the faith of the nominal Christian in such dire conditions? How does Churchianity stand up to this sort of test? We ask the questions trembling, for who knows what dread tests may yet befall and betide our own Church.'

Nehemiah had the wisdom and foresight to see that the central citadel must at all costs be safeguarded, and this must be our task today, the establishment of the real priorities in the life of the Church. Other things, all very good and very noble in themselves, will be attended to in course of time. May God give us clear-sighted vision to recognise what the important things are, and cleave to them, come what may!

68) 12:1-26

The important and significant part of this chapter begins at 27, with the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem. It is easy to see that this event was a high peak in the history of Nehemiah and the returned exiles. But this does not mean that the first 26 verses are not important and have no significance. To assume this would be to call in question any doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. The Holy Spirit of God records nothing in vain.

There are two lessons at least for us to learn from this list of names: the first is that none of the names seems to be significant to us, but it is suggested that this is precisely the message. God chooses the weak things of the world for the fulfilment of His purposes in the world. These are all real people. The Bible is the record of God's dealings with men. And if we do not know anything at all about them except their names, we can still be very sure that each name has a history of divine dealings with it, by which God forged an instrument of His will. The second lesson is that the list deals with the priests who went to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel in 538 BC. (1-7), and their descendants to Ezra's day (10-21), and the Levites (8,9) and their descendants (22-26). Thus we are given the continuity of the names spanning almost a century, from 538-444 BC, from Zerubbabel to Nehemiah. And the point that is being made is this: all alike, from the early time to the later, had a part to play in, and contributed to, the final, climactic work of the walls of Jerusalem and their dedication! This is the force of the inclusion of the earlier names in association with the dedication of the walls in 27ff. It was all one work, and the only difference was that the earlier workers were engaged in foundations, whereas the later were involved in the superstructure. Zerubbabel's work was not less important than Ezra's or Nehemiah's; only different.

69) 12-1-26

Let us continue the thought at the end of the previous Note. It will be remembered that in an earlier Note, when we considered the passage of time between the first return under Zerubbabel and Ezra and Nehemiah's time - a period of 100 years - we mentioned the outworking of the divine strategy in the history of the 19th century, and the fifty years of revival beginning in 1859. But we should also remember the work of many faithful people before that time - many of them unknown to history, who served their generation faithfully before passing to their rest and reward. They did not work in vain; as well as seeing the work of God advance in their own particular circumstances, they also made their significant contribution to the larger, over-all pattern of the Lord's work. So it was here; and so also it is today. In the nature of the case, it may not be possible at present, or even ever, to see the significance of the work we are called to do in the kingdom of God. It may be ours to lay foundations, and the point about foundations is that they are not seen in the completed edifice. But everything is built upon them, and depends on them! (see Isaiah 58:12). We may not as yet be at the climactic stage of the fulfilment of God's plans and purposes for our century, we may never see their fruition. But in this deeper sense, we will be in on it, even if we are not more than names in the memory of a few faithful souls, for we will have made our contribution to the ongoing work, for the glory of God. We have been allotted a portion, a share, in that work. Let us do it, then, with all our might (cf Hebrews 11:39).

70) 12:1-26

The next lesson of the chapter really gathers itself up into focus from the beginning of the book. We have seen this man Nehemiah striding across the stage of history, with a resolution of purpose, and unhesitating faith and courage - because he could see (relatively speaking, of course) the end from the beginning. He had discernment to grasp what God wanted done, and had the vision to work on, trusting implicitly that what He has purposed He would also perform. And because he had vision, he held fast. It is a great thing to be as sure of God as that!

If we think back over the general pattern and progress of the work it seems clear that there must have been times not only for Nehemiah but also for the people when everything would seem utterly cohesion-less, utterly uncoordinated, with neither rhyme nor reason seemingly in it. Would there not have been temptations to discouragement and even despair (cf 4:10)? But how nobly Nehemiah rallied the despondents! And it was vision that did it (cf Psalm 43:5). The message of all this for today is surely clear: Let not the magnitude of the task that faces us appal our spirits. Let us remember that others have faced tremendous hazards and odds, and yet have seen the almighty hand of God at work. Let us think of the mighty 16th century Reformation, and of the seemingly futile protests made by the pre-Reformers like Wycliffe and the Lollards, when their witness seemed to be crashing uselessly against an impregnable wall. But they had vision, and they had endurance. And the Reformation became a blessed fact! Let us think of John Knox, and the overwhelming opposition he encountered. Yet he won through, and the disorder and rubble and chaos yielded to cohesion and pattern and order. We should never be discouraged, even when it is difficult to see rhyme or reason in the confusing pattern of events. The day will come when there is a rightly ordered house of God in Scotland, and what a day of rejoicing it will be! 'Hold fast till I come' is the message that rings out from this chapter.

71) 12:27-47

The next lesson of the chapter lies in the actual dedication of the walls themselves. It was clearly a very notable occasion, and it has several things in particular to teach us. For one thing, there was the double march of the massed choirs round the walls. This is the day of protest marches, but here was a praise march, and it must have been a stirring spectacle, because they were a big company and they certainly knew how to sing! It was a wonderful testimony and a wonderful thanksgiving. It was an unusual manifestation; for it was God that had made them to rejoice. The symbolism of traversing the entire walls was to indicate - and ensure - that the whole wall, and the city it contained, was of God and for God and was encircled by His grace. The whole place was dedicated to God, and therefore protected by Him:

With salvation's walls surrounded
Thou mayest smile at all thy foes.

The procedure is reminiscent of two famous occasions in the people's past history - the dedication of Solomon's Temple, and that of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. It may well be that these were in Nehemiah's mind at this point - hence the concern for the procession, the music and the sacrifices, as in Solomon's day. We should particularly note what is said in 46 in the reference to the days of David and Asaph. This is how they did it in the old days, and this is how we are going to do it now, Nehemiah means - in other words, a marked reverence for olden days and the desire to conform to honoured tradition. And, just as in both these historic occasions, so here also God was present in grace and power: God had made them to rejoice with great joy (43).

72) 12:27-47

The upraising of the walls of the city, and the down coming of God to dwell in the midst! This is the pattern and the message for us today, the resolution and obedience. In this connection we should note what is said in 44-47 about the return to the old patterns and the old days, and the restoration of right order, biblical order, in the life of the people. We are often told impatiently today that it is an idle dream to hanker after old days, and that the Church must move with the times and find new forms for its witness. It must be contemporary, and we cannot turn the clock back. Well, here is a passage which tells us it can be done. They did it. They restored the old days, they recaptured the former spirit. It is possible. It is not an idle dream to long for a return to the old godliness! But let us be clear about what is being said. It is not simply a return to old days for old days' sake, and we today should not be thinking in terms of trying to recapture the atmosphere of, say the 'Moody and Sankey' era, as if the adoption of the Sankey hymn book in worship could guarantee revival; rather, it is a return to biblical ways, and biblical principles, and the recovery of a biblical gospel. This is the only 'going back to the old days' that will be of any use.

73) 12:27-47

One further point here before we pass to the next chapter. In 43b we read that 'the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off'. This has an important lesson to teach us. Here was a people worshipping and rejoicing and praising 'in the Spirit', and the noise of it went far and wide. How important it is that worship and praise be real and spiritual. The quality of our praise is a contribution to the work of the kingdom of God. When God's people sing the praise of His great Name with full and rejoicing hearts, the Spirit comes down to inhabit their praises. And straightway their praise is Spirit-charged and potent, with virtue to bless and encourage, and heal, and save. And it is precisely in these circumstances that things can happen to those who come among us - the Spirit can speak, and does speak, as words are winged to needy hearts. How important, then, that our hearts be in our worship, and how needful to concentrate on what we are singing. One recalls what is said in Mark 2:1,2: 'It was noised that Jesus was in the house; and straightway many were gathered together'. His presence cannot be hid, and when the joy of our place is heard even afar off, it will draw others to taste and see that the Lord is good. It is not the literal volume of sound, but the spiritual volume and quality - this is the real point: when men get to know that God is here, this is the evangelism that gets places!

74) 13:1-3

The account of the dedication of the Temple really ended in 12:43, and from 44 onwards, beginning with the words 'And from that time' we have a statement of things that happened, not so much on the day of dedication, as round about the time of the climax of the work, i.e. associated with its general completion. The verses are therefore a brief summary of all that Nehemiah effected in Jerusalem. This applies also to 13:1-3, which belong to that summary. We might interpret the verses thus: this was the sort of thing that was done in these glorious days. We look, then, at 1-3 in this light. They record something of great importance about the people of God under the leadership of Nehemiah. They had become a people under the discipline of the Word of God, and people captive to it and obedient to its dictates. They were prepared to order their lives in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures. This was the mark of the reality of their dedication and consecration and covenanting with God. One recalls the similar attitude in the Scottish Reformers, expressed in Knox's words at the beginning of the Scots Confession: 'If any man will note in this our confession any article or sentence repugnant to God's holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to admonish us of the same in writing: and we upon our honours and fidelity, by God's grace do promise him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from His holy Scriptures, or else reformation of that which shall prove to be amiss'. Conscience captive to the Word of God! What a way to live! God give us grace to follow in their train!

75) 13:1-3

What a way to live, we said in yesterday's Note. Yes, but it is a costly way, and it is not a way that can be maintained automatically or without effort. This is a position that requires to be maintained resolutely, with a constant battle against the temptation to take lower ground. There is, in fact, no position of spiritual dedication from which it is not possible to slip away and back once again, no position which is unassailable by the powers of evil. And this is what happened here, among the people of God, when Nehemiah left and returned for the time being to the king's court. This is the lesson for us. Unhallowed things can be swept out of the life of the believer, out of the life of a fellowship too, in the glow of the spirit of dedication. But they can creep back again, and can be allowed to creep back again, through carelessness, negligence, or sheer backslidings, or through a spirit of worldliness. The price of security and safety in the spiritual life is constant vigilance. The temptation to take lower ground, and order life by other authorities than that of the Word of God is a very real one. That it should have been yielded to so soon after their covenant and Nehemiah's departure raises the question whether in fact many of them had allowed the discipline of the Word to go deep enough into their hearts. It is so easy, in a spiritual movement, to be carried along on the wave of spiritual exaltation, without one's own heart being deeply affected. It is the parable of the sower once again - some seed which sprang up and flourished at the first soon withered, because it had no root. And some lived, outwardly touched by a spiritual movement, soon falter and slip back, when removed from the immediate influence of its source. Let us ask ourselves how we would fare if we were to be taken away from the encouragement and support of the fellowship?

76) 13:4-9

Four matters are mentioned in particular as indicating the backsliding of the people: (i) the intrusion of Tobiah into the courts of the Temple (4-9); (ii) the lapsing in the provision for the Levites (10-14); (iii) the desecration of the Sabbath (15.22); and (iv) mixed marriages (22ff). We look at the first of these now. Tobiah was an Ammonite, and Ammonites were forbidden (1) to come into the congregation of God forever. But, especially, this Tobiah was an enemy and a dangerous man (cf 6:18-19). We have already seen how dangerous this kind of 'fifth-column' activity was likely to be to the work of God, and how wary Nehemiah was of it. In chapter 6 Tobiah was exerting his influence from without, and maintaining contact with some of the nobles within by letter. But now he was right inside! How are we to explain this? Well, we should bear in mind that it was Nehemiah who recorded the ongoing work, and that the comment in the earlier chapters are his, and his the interpretation of the extent and nature of the opposition. And it may be that there were those who tended to think that Nehemiah was just a bit extreme in his interpretation, a bit paranoiac, almost, and that (a) the dangers were not as great as he imagined, and (b) the enemies were not so dangerous as he thought, or so completely opposed to the work. Well, here is the enemy now esconsed right in the heart of the work, in the Temple itself! And how did it come about? He was related to the high priest! Sometimes it might be thought that the regulations for 'separation' and 'no mixing' were far too strict and uncharitable, but we see here how necessary they were. This was a forbidden alliance for Eliashib, and oh! the trouble it caused!

77) 13:10-14

Nehemiah made short shrift of Tobiah's intrusion when he returned, throwing out all his stuff into the street! This is the pattern we too must follow, in the spiritual application of the incident. Our hearts are God's temples, and we must throw out the enemy and all his furniture, and bring in the vessels of the Lord.

Next, the question of the provision for the Levites came up for attention. The right ordering of the Lord's work was soon, it seems, allowed to go by default. When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he found that the Levites had been obliged to return to their fields because of the lack of support for them. The keynote here is neglect. Nehemiah's challenge in 11 is noteworthy: 'Why is the house of the Lord forsaken?' Let us look back to 10:39, 'We will not forsake the house of our God' i.e. in the matter of tithes and offerings. But they did, and in doing so, they had forsaken the covenant (the elementary lesson this teaches us is: 'Remember your vows of membership'). The frightening thing in all this is that these backslidings were repeating the patterns of former days, the patterns by which the people finally landed in exile. Furthermore, if we look at Malachi 1 and 2, we see how similar all this is to the complaints of the Lord against His people at an earlier stage of the work - the carelessness, the dullness and loss of interest, the declension of the priesthood, the marriage with strange wives, the robbing God of His rightful tithes and offerings. The question that arises here is: Is this an inevitable experience? Are we to expect this, as a matter of course? Is Christian life also to be nothing more than a series of comings and goings? Surely not, if the testimony of the early Church is to be taken seriously! The power of the indwelling Spirit is more than sufficient, and we must not allow ourselves the luxury of acquiescing in the 'backwards and forwards pattern', as if it were inevitable. It is not!

78) 13:15-22

We have only to compare these verses with 10:31 to see how quickly the people had slipped away from the hallowing of the Lord's Day. It is always significant of something spiritually wrong when men find the Sabbath irksome and binding and restricting, for this is to have lost the immense blessing of the day, and its grace. The question that arises here, of course, is what our attitude is to the Sabbath today, as Christians. A fair reading of the Old Testament makes it plain that the Sabbath law had a place of supreme importance, and was given far more significance than any other law (cf Exodus 31:13-17, Ezekiel 20:17, Jeremiah 17:19ff). Clearly, God Himself set so much store by it, and for this reason: it was the sign of His covenant -relationship with His people, and therefore neglect of it on their part was neglect of Him and a breaking of that covenant. It was the outward expression of His claim of them as His people, the pledge of His mercy and the seal of their loyalty and obedience. To neglect a day when He specially met with His people for blessing was therefore serious indeed. If this be so, can the Sabbath principle, which, we should note, antedates the law and goes back to the order of creation, suddenly becomes of no importance to God, no interest to Him, now that the New Testament has dawned? On any view of the relation of the Old Testament to the New, this is surely hard to believe. The same principle holds good, for the Sabbath is still the day when God specially blesses His people, and to neglect it is still to neglect Him and set little store by His blessing. All days are not the same, in this sense, where relationship is concerned. Let men begin to neglect birthdays and anniversaries, and see whether all days are the same! To observe an anniversary is hardly a legalistic bondage. Why, then, should Sabbath observance be? To forget such a day is a slight, and is taken as a slight, too!

79) 13:23-31

The question of mixed marriages, dealt with in these verses, also takes us back to 10:30, where the issue is clearly seen, along with the Sabbath question, as belonging to the covenant relation of the people with God. They were to be a people separated unto God, and this was one of the evidences and symbols of that separation. To indulge in inter marriage with other peoples indicated the loss of their separated character, and therefore the loss of their testimony. The word 'holiness' has in its root form two meanings, 'separation' and 'brightness', and the one qualifies the other. When the separation goes, so does the brightness.

If we look at the whole chapter in perspective, we may see the link between the various aspects of declension. The fact that Eliashib is mentioned again in 28 seems to link them together and point to the unhallowed liaison mentioned there as being the key and the heart of it. Once the heart of the work is assailed, everything else will flow in contamination from it. The lesson from this is: resist beginnings. When once the enemy gains access to the heart, whether it is the heart of the Temple or the heart of our innermost spiritual life, his baneful influence will spread throughout. Keep the heart, says the Old Testament, for out of it are the issues of life.

The two central lessons that emerge, therefore are these: on the one hand, there is no position of spiritual consecration from which it is not possible to slip and fall, through carelessness, and fall back to former declension. On the other hand, there is no need for this to happen in spiritual life - the resources are sufficient, and more than sufficient, for a life of faithfulness to the end. Christ is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.