**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**NEHEMIAH-001. A REFORMER'S SCHOOLING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, 2. That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. 3. And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. 4. And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, 5. And said, I beseech Thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and observe His commandments: 6. Let Thine ear now be attentive, and Thine eyes open, that Thou mayest hear the prayer of Thy servant, which I pray before Thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel Thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against Thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. 7. We have dealt very corruptly against Thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which Thou commandedst Thy servant Moses. 8. Remember, I beseech Thee, the word that Thou commandedst Thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: 9. But if ye turn unto Me, and keep My commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there. 10. Now these are Thy servants and Thy people, whom Thou hast redeemed by Thy great power, and by Thy strong hand. 11. O Lord, I beseech Thee, let now Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant, and to the prayer of Thy servants, who desire to fear Thy name: and prosper, I pray Thee, Thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer."*

*Nehemiah 1:1-11*

The date of the completion of the Temple is 516 B.C.; that of Nehemiah's arrival 445 B.C. The colony of returned exiles seems to have made little progress during that long period. Its members settled down, and much of their enthusiasm cooled, as we see from the reforms which Ezra had to inaugurate fourteen years before Nehemiah. The majority of men, even if touched by spiritual fervour, find it hard to keep on the high levels for long. Breathing is easier lower down. As is often the case, a brighter flame of zeal burned in the bosoms of sympathisers at a distance than in those of the actual workers, whose contact with hard realities and petty details disenchanted them. Thus the impulse to nobler action came, not from one of the colony, but from a Jew in the court of the Persian king.

This passage tells us how God prepared a man for a great work, and how the man prepared himself.

**I. Sad tidings and their effect on a devout servant of God (vs. 1-4).**

The time and place are precisely given. The month Chislev corresponds to the end of November and beginning of December. The twentieth year is that of Artaxerxes (Neh. ii. 1). Shushan, or Susa, was the royal winter residence, and the palace was a distinct quarter of the city, occupying an artificial eminence. Note the absence of the name of the king. Nehemiah is so familiar with his greatness that he takes for granted that every reader can fill the gaps. But, though the omission shows how large a space the court occupied in his thoughts, a true Jewish heart beat below the courtier's robe. That flexibility which enabled them to stand as trusted servants of the kings of many lands, and yet that inflexible adherence to, and undying love of, Israel, has always been a national characteristic. We can think of this youthful cup-bearer as yearning for one glimpse of the mountains round about Jerusalem while he filled his post in Shushan.

His longings were kindled into resolve by intercourse with a little party of Jews from Judaea, among whom was his own brother. They had been to see how things went there, and the fact that one of them was a member of Nehemiah's family seems to imply that the same sentiments belonged to the whole household. Eager questions brought out sorrowful answers. The condition of the remnant was one of great affliction and reproach, and the ground of the reproach was probably (Neh. 2:17; 4:2-4) the still ruined fortifications.

It has been supposed that the breaking down of the walls and burning of the gates, mentioned in verse 3, were recent, and subsequent to the events recorded in Ezra; but it is more probable that the project for rebuilding the defences, which had been stopped by superior orders (Ezra 4:12-16), had not been resumed, and that the melancholy ruins were those which had met the eyes of Zerubbabel nearly a hundred years before. Communication between Shushan and Jerusalem cannot have been so infrequent that the facts now borne in on Nehemiah might not have been known before. But the impression made by facts depends largely on their narrator, and not a little on the mood of the hearer. It was one thing to hear general statements, and another to sit with one's brother, and see through his eyes the dismal failure of the remnant to carry out the purpose of their return. So the story, whether fresh or repeated with fresh force, made a deep dint in the young cupbearer's heart, and changed his life's outlook. God prepares His servants for their work by laying on their souls a sorrowful realisation of the miseries which other men regard, and they themselves have often regarded, very lightly. The men who have been raised up to do great work for God and men, have always to begin by greatly and sadly feeling the weight of the sins and sorrows which they are destined to remove. No man will do worthy work at rebuilding the walls who has not wept over the ruins.

So Nehemiah prepared himself for his work by brooding over the tidings with tears, by fasting and by prayer. There is no other way of preparation. Without the sad sense of men's sorrows, there will be no earnestness in alleviating them, nor self-sacrificing devotion; and without much prayer there will be little consciousness of weakness or dependence on divine help.

Note the grand and apparently immediate resolution to throw up brilliant prospects and face a life of danger and suffering and toil. Nehemiah was evidently a favourite with the king, and had the ball at his foot. But the ruins on Zion were more attractive to him than the splendours of Shushan, and he willingly flung away his chances of a great career to take his share of affliction and reproach. He has never had justice done him in popular estimation. He is not one of the well-known biblical examples of heroic self-abandonment; but he did just what Moses did, and the eulogium of the Epistle to the Hebrews fits him as well as the lawgiver; for he too chose rather to suffer with the people of God than to enjoy pleasures for a season. So must we all, in our several ways, do, if we would have a share in building the walls of the city of God.

**II. The prayer (vs. 5-11).**

The course of thought in this prayer is very instructive. It begins with solemnly laying before God His own great name, as the mightiest plea with Him, and the strongest encouragement to the suppliant. That commencement is no mere proper invocation, conventionally regarded as the right way of beginning, but it expresses the petitioner's effort to lay hold on God's character as the ground of his hope of answer. The terms employed remarkably blend what Nehemiah had learned from Persian religion and what from a better source. He calls upon Jehovah, the great name which was the special possession of Israel. He also uses the characteristic Persian designation of the God of heaven, and identifies the bearer of that name, not with the god to whom it was originally applied, but with Israel's Jehovah. He takes the crown from the head of the false deity, and lays it at the feet of the God of his fathers. Whatsoever names for the Supreme Excellence any tongues have coined, they all belong to our God, in so far as they are true and noble. The modern science of comparative religion yields many treasures which should be laid up in Jehovah's Temple.

But the rest of the designations are taken from the Old Testament, as was fitting. The prayer throughout is full of allusions and quotations, and shows how this cupbearer of Artaxerxes had fed his young soul on God's word, and drawn thence the true nourishment of high and holy thoughts and strenuous resolutions and self-sacrificing deeds. Prayers which are cast in the mould of God's own revelation of Himself will not fail of answer. True prayer catches up the promises that flutter down to us, and flings them up again like arrows.

The prayer here is all built, then, on that name of Jehovah, and on what the name involves, chiefly on the thought of God as keeping covenant and mercy. He has bound Himself in solemn, irrefragable compact, to a certain line of action. Men know where to have Him, if we may venture on the familiar expression. He has given us a chart of His course, and He will adhere to it. Therefore we can go to Him with our prayers, so long as we keep these within the ample space of His covenant, and ourselves within its terms, by loving obedience.

The petition that God's ears might be sharpened and His eyes open to the prayer is cast in a familiar mould. It boldly transfers to Him not only the semblance of man's form, but also the likeness of His processes of action. Hearing the cry for help precedes active intervention in the case of men's help, and the strong imagery of the prayer conceives of similar sequence in God. But the figure is transparent, and the anthropomorphism so plain that no mistakes can arise in its interpretation.

Note, too, the light touch with which the suppliant's relation to God (Thy servant) and his long-continued cry (day and night) are but just brought in for a moment as pleas for a gracious hearing. The prayer is for Thy servants the children of Israel, in which designation, as the next clauses show, the relation established by God, and not the conduct of men, is pleaded as a reason for an answer.

The mention of that relation brings at once to Nehemiah's mind the terrible unfaithfulness to it which had marked, and still continued to mark, the whole nation. So lowly confession follows (vs. 6, 7). Unprofitable servants they had indeed been. The more loftily we think of our privileges, the more clearly should we discern our sins. Nothing leads a true heart to such self-ashamed penitence as reflection on God's mercy. If a man thinks that God has taken him for a servant, the thought should bow him with conscious unworthiness, not lift him in self-satisfaction. Nehemiah's confession not only sprung from the thought of Israel's vocation, so poorly fulfilled, but it also laid the groundwork for further petitions. It is useless to ask God to help us to repair the wastes if we do not cast out the sins which have made them. The beginning of all true healing of sorrow is confession of sins. Many promising schemes for the alleviation of national and other distresses have come to nothing because, unlike Nehemiah s, they did not begin with prayer, or prayed for help without acknowledging sin.

And the man who is to do work for God and to get God to bless his work must not be content with acknowledging other people's sins, but must always say, We have sinned, and not seldom say, I have sinned. That penitent consciousness of evil is indispensible to all who would make their fellows happier. God works with bruised reeds. The sense of individual transgression gives wonderful tenderness, patience amid gainsaying, submission in failure, dependence on God in difficulty, and lowliness in success. Without it we shall do little for ourselves or for anybody else.

The prayer next reminds God of His own words (vs. 8, 9), freely quoted and combined from several passages (Lev. 26:33-45; Deut. 4:25-31, etc.). The application of these passages to the then condition of things is at first sight somewhat loose, since part of the people were already restored; and the purport of the prayer is not the restoration of the remainder, but the deliverance of those already in the land from their distresses. Still, the promise gives encouragement to the prayer and is powerful with God, inasmuch as it could not be said to have been fulfilled by so incomplete a restoration as that as that at present realised. What God does must be perfectly done; and His great word is not exhausted so long as any fuller accomplishment of it can be imagined.

The reminder of the promise is clinched (v. 10) by the same appeal as formerly to the relation to Himself into which God had been pleased to bring the nation, with an added reference to former deeds, such as the Exodus, in which His strong hand had delivered them. We are always sure of an answer if we ask God not to contradict Himself. Since He has begun He will make an end. It will never be said of Him that He began to build and was not able to finish. His past is a mirror in which we can read His future. The return from Babylon is implied in the Exodus.

A reiteration of earlier words follows, with the addition that Nehemiah now binds, as it were, his single prayer in a bundle with those of the like-minded in Israel. He gathers single ears into a sheaf, which he brings as a wave-offering. And then, in one humble little sentence at the end, he puts his only personal request. The modesty of the man is lovely. His prayer has been all for the people. Remarkably enough, there is no definite petition in it. He never once says right out what he so earnestly desires, and the absence of specific requests might be laid hold of by sceptical critics as an argument against the genuineness of the prayer. But it is rather a subtle trait, on which no forger would have been likely to hit. Sometimes silence is the very result of entire occupation of mind with a thought. He says nothing about the particular nature of his request, just because he is so full of it. But he does ask for favour in the eyes of this man, and that he may be prospered this day.

So this was his morning prayer on that eventful day, which was to settle his life's work. The certain days of solitary meditation on his nation's griefs had led to a resolution. He says nothing about his long brooding, his slow decision, his conflicts with lower projects of personal ambition. He burns his own smoke, as we all should learn to do. But he asks that the capricious and potent will of the king may be inclined to grant his request. If our morning supplication is Prosper Thy servant this day, and our purposes are for God's glory, we need not fear facing anybody. However powerful Artaxerxes was, he was but this man, not God. The phrase does not indicate contempt or undervaluing of the solid reality of his absolute power over Nehemiah, but simply expresses the conviction that the king, too, was a subject of God s, and that his heart was in the hand of Jehovah, to mould as He would. The consciousness of dependence on God and the habit of communion with Him give a man a clear sight of the limitations of earthly dignities, and a modest boldness which is equally remote from rudeness and servility.

Thus prepared for whatever might be the issue of that eventful day, the young cupbearer rose from his knees, drew a long breath, and went to his work. Well for us if we go to ours, whether it be a day of crisis or of commonplace, in like fashion! Then we shall have like defence and like calmness of heart.