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

**NEHEMIAH-008. SABBATH OBSERVANCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"15. In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals. 16. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. 17. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? 18. Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath, 19. And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day. 20. So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice. 21. Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath. 22. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Thy mercy."*

*Nehemiah 13:15-22*

Many religious and moral reformations depend for their vitality on one man, and droop if his influence be withdrawn. It was so with Nehemiah's work. He toiled for twelve years in Jerusalem, and then returned for certain days to the king at Babylon. The length of his absence is not given; but it was long enough to let much of his work be undone, and to give him much trouble to restore it to the condition in which he had left it. This last chapter of his book is but a sad close for a record which began with such high hope, and tells of such strenuous, self-sacrificing effort. The last page of many a reformer's history has been, like Nehemiah s, a sad account of efforts to stem the ebbing tide of enthusiasm and the flowing tide of worldliness. The heavy stone is rolled a little way up hill, and, as soon as one strong hand is withdrawn, down it tumbles again to its old place. The evanescence of great men's work makes much of the tragedy of history.

Our passage is particularly concerned with Nehemiah's efforts to enforce Sabbath observance. The rest of the chapter is occupied with similar efforts to set right other irregularities of a ceremonial character, such as the exclusion of Gentiles from the Temple, the exaction of the portions of the Levites, and the like. The passage falls into three parts--the abuse (vs. 15, 16), the vigorous remedies (vs. 17-22), and the prayer (v. 22).

**I.** The abuse consisted in Sabbath work and trading. Nehemiah found, on his return, that the people in Judaea--that is, in the country districts--carried on their farm labour and also brought their produce to market to Jerusalem on the Sabbath. So he testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals; that is, probably meaning that he warned them either in person or by messengers before taking further steps. Not only did Jews break the sacred day, but they let heathen do so too. The narrative tells, with a kind of horror, the many aggravations of this piece of wickedness. They--Gentiles with whom contact defiled--sold on the Sabbath--the day of rest--to the children of Judah--God's people--in Jerusalem--the Holy City. It was a many-barrelled crime. Tyre was far from Jerusalem, and one does not see how fish could have been brought in good condition. Perhaps their perishableness was the excuse for allowing their sale on the Sabbath, as is sometimes the case in fishing-villages even in Sabbath-keeping Scotland. Such was the abuse with which Nehemiah struggled.

It is easy to pooh-pooh his crusade against Sabbath labour as mere scrupulousness about externals. But it is a blunder and an injustice to a noble character if we forget that the stage of revelation at which he stood necessarily made him more dependent on externals than Christians are or should be. But his vindication does not need such considerations. He had a truer insight into what active men needed for vigorous working days, and what devout men needed for healthy religion, than many moderns who smile at his eagerness about mere externalisms.

It is easy to ridicule the Jewish Sabbath and the Puritan Sunday. No doubt there have been and are well-meant but mistaken efforts to insist on too rigid observance. No doubt it has been often forgotten by good people that the Christian Lord's Day is not the Jewish Sabbath. Of course the religious observance of the day is not a fit subject for legislation. But the need for a seventh day of rest is impressed on our physical and intellectual nature; and devout hearts will joyfully find their best rest in Christian worship and service. The vigour of religious life demands special seasons set apart for worship. Unless there be such reservoirs along the road, there will be but a thin trickle of a brook by the way. It is all very well to talk about religion diffused through the life, but it will not be so diffused unless it is concentrated at certain times.

They are no benefactors to the community who seek to break down and relax the stringency of the prohibition of labour. If once the idea that Sunday is a day of amusement take root, the amusement of some will require the hard work of others, and the custom of work will tend to extend, till rest becomes the exception, and work the rule. There never was a time when men lived so furiously fast as now. The pace of modern life demands Sunday rest more than ever. If a railway car is run continually it will wear out sooner than if it were laid aside for a day or two occasionally; and if it is run at express speed it will need the rest more. We are all going at top speed; and there would be more breakdowns if it were not for that blessed institution which some people think they are promoting the public good by destroying--a seventh day of rest.

Our great trading centres in England have the same foreign element to complicate matters as Nehemiah had to deal with. The Tyrian fishmongers knew and cared nothing for Israel's Jehovah or Sabbath, and their presence would increase the tendency to disregard the day. So with us, foreigners of many nationalities, but alike in their disregard of our religious observances, leaven the society, and help to mould the opinions and practices, of our great cities. That is a very real source of danger in regard to Sabbath observance and many other things; and Christian people should be on their guard against it.

**II.** The vigorous remedies applied by Nehemiah were administered first to the rulers. He sent for the nobles, and laid the blame at their doors. Ye profane the day, said he. Men in authority are responsible for crimes which they could check, but prefer to wink at. Nehemiah seems to trace all the national calamities to the breach of the Sabbath; but of course he is simply laying stress on the sin about which he is speaking, as any man who sets himself earnestly to work to fight any form of evil is apt to do. Then the men who are not in earnest cry out about exaggeration. Many other sins besides Sabbath-breaking had a share in sending Israel into captivity; and if Nehemiah had been fighting with idolatrous tendencies he would have isolated idolatry as the cause of its calamities, just as, when fighting against Sabbath-breaking, he emphasises that sin.

Nehemiah was governor for the Persian king, and so had a right to rate these nobles. In this day the people have the same right, and there are many social sins for which they should arraign civic and other authorities. Christian principles unflinchingly insisted on by Christian people, and brought to bear, by ballot-boxes and other persuasive ways, on what stands for conscience in some high places, would make a wonderful difference on many of the abominations of our cities. Go to the nobles first, and lay the burden on the backs that ought to carry it.

Then Nehemiah took practical measures by shutting the city gates on the eve of the Sabbath, and putting some of his own servants as a watch. The thing seems to have been done without any notice; so when the country folk came in, as usual, on the Sabbath, they could not get into the city, and camped outside, making a visible temptation to the citizens, to slip out and do a little business, if they could manage to elude the guards. Once or twice this happened; and then Nehemiah himself seems to have taken them in hand, with a very plain and sufficiently emphatic warning: If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.

Of course, from that time they came no more on the Sabbath, as was natural after such a volley. A man with a good strong will is apt to get his own way, even when he is not clothed with the authority of a governor. Then Nehemiah strengthened the guard, or perhaps withdrew his own servants and substituted for them Levites, whose official position would put them in full sympathy with his efforts. That priestly guard would be inflexible, and with its appointment the abuse appears to have been crushed.

The example of Nehemiah's enforcing Sabbath observance is not to be taken as a pattern for Christian communities, without many limitations. But it appears to the present writer that it is perfectly legitimate for the civil power to insist upon, and if necessary to enforce, the observance of Sunday as a day of rest; and that, since legitimate, it is for the well-being of the community that it should do so. Tyrians might believe anything they chose, and use the day of rest as they thought proper, so long as they did not sell fish on it. We do not interfere with religious convictions when we enjoin Sunday observance. Nehemiah's argument has sometimes to be used, even about such a matter: If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.

The methods adopted may yield suggestions for all who would aim at reforming abuses or public immoralities. One most necessary step is to cut off, as far as possible, opportunities for the sin. There will be no trade if you shut the gates the night before. There will be little drunkenness if there are no liquor shops. It is quite true that people cannot be made virtuous by legislation, but it is also true that they may be saved from temptations to become vicious by it.

Another hint comes from Nehemiah's vigorous word to the country folk outside the wall. There is need for very strong determination and much sanctified obstinacy in fighting popular abuses. They die hard. It is permissible to invoke the aid of the lawful authority. But a man with strong convictions and earnest purpose will be able to impress his convictions on a mass, even if he have no guards at his back. The one thing needful for Christian reformers is, not the power to appeal to force, but the force which they can carry within them. And it is better when the traders love the Sabbath too well to wish to drive bargains on it, than when they are hindered from doing as they wish by Nehemiah's strong will or formidable threats.

Once more, the guard of Levites may suggest that the execution of measures for the reformation of manners or morals is best entrusted to those who are in sympathy with them. Levites made faithful watchmen. Many a promising measure for reformation has come to nothing because committed to the hands of functionaries who did not care for its success. The instruments are almost as important as the measures which they carry out.

**III.** Nehemiah's prayer occurs thrice in this chapter, at the close of each section recounting his reforming acts. In the first instance (v. 14) it is most full, and puts very plainly the merit of good deeds as a plea with God. The same thing is implied in its form in verse 22. But while, no doubt, the tone of the prayer is startling to us, and is not such as should be offered now by Christians, it but echoes the principle of retribution which underlies the law. This do, and thou shalt live, was the very foundation of Nehemiah's form of God's revelation. We do not plead our own merits, because we are not under the law, but under grace, and the principle underlying the gospel is life by impartation of unmerited mercy and divine life. But the law of retribution still remains valid for Christians in so far as that God will never forget any of their works, and will give them full recompense for their work of faith and labour of love. Eternal life here and hereafter is wholly the gift of God; but that fact does not exclude the notion of the recompense of reward from the Christian conception of the future. It becomes not us to present our good deeds before the Judge, since they are stained and imperfect, and the goodness in them is His gift. But it becomes Him to crown them with His gracious approbation, and to proportion the cities ruled in that future world to the talents faithfully used here. We need not be afraid of obscuring the truth that we are saved not of works, lest any man should boast, though we insist that a Christian man is rewarded according to his works.

Nehemiah had no false notion of his own goodness; for, while he asked for recompense for these good deeds of his, he could not but add, Spare me according to the greatness of Thy mercy. He who asks to be spared must know himself in peril of destruction; and he who invokes mercy must think that, if he were dealt with according to justice, he would be in evil case. So the consciousness of weakness and sin is an integral part of this prayer, and that takes all the apparent self-righteousness out of the previous petition. However worthy of and sure of reward a Christian man's acts of love and efforts for the spread of God's honour may be, the doer of them must still be looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.