

The Fear of God

By Paris Reidhead*

That you might be able to make freer reference to the Scripture and our Text, will you open your Bible to Nehemiah, Chapter 5. We have been considering, in the study of Nehemiah, that which is necessary, if God is to secure a testimony and a witness. Nebuchadnezzar's armies destroyed Jerusalem, because of sin. Ezra returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple, and reestablished worship, but God still did not have all that He desired. It is not only a relationship to the Lord which is spoken of by the presents of the Temple with its offerings and sacrifice; it is also the witness to the world which is spoken of by the walls.

And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews. For there were that said, We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore we take up corn for them, that we may eat, and live. Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth. There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards. And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words. Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them. And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer. Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies? I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, let us leave off this usury. Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them. Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise. Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the LORD. And the people did according to this promise.

Now the walls had been destroyed and turned into rubble. The gates had been burned. And Nehemiah was sent of God back to Jerusalem for the express purpose of rebuilding the walls and reestablishing the order of the life of the people consistent with the testimony of the Temple. I see in this a pattern that is applicable to us today as God is seeking to get for Himself that testimony which He deserves, which is consistent with the glory of the New Covenant. You will recall that Israel and all that happened to the nation was for purpose of an example, or ensample, or teaching. The first witness that God asked for was a nation, the literal blood descendants of Abraham. But this failed, even though His Tabernacle was in the midst of the camp, and His presence was signaled by the pillar of cloud by day, and fire by night, God was still too far away from the scene of test and difficulty. There was no problem when the people were gathered for worship. The problem came when they were out in the villages, in their fields, pursuing the normal course of their life. This is when the issues arose and the difficulties confronted them. This is the time when they would not be as aware of God's presence. Their back might be to the pillar of cloud. And thus they would stoop to sacrifice to Baal, to insure a good crop, or Ashtoreth to give license to appetite, or Moloch for the purpose of securing position and power. And, therefore, God's presence at Jerusalem with the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, the law written upon tables of stone was too far away from the scene of test.

He said through Isaiah, "I will do a new thing. I will go to a people that you have called unclean, heathen, pagans. I will give springs. I will give rivers of living water. They shall drink of this water and by the drinking shall be transformed, and I will form a people out of that which you have considered to be off scouring and worthless, owls and dragons, I will form a people for my name" (Isa. 43:19-20). Through Jeremiah, He said, "This covenant that I made with your fathers you broke, the covenant made on tables of stone. I am going to make a new covenant, said He. I will write My law upon the heart" (Jer. 31:33). Ah now it is coming to the scene of action, the scene of contest and difficulty. And through Ezekiel, He said, "I will take away the heart of stone, give you a heart of flesh, and I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes" (Eze. 36:26-27). Just

as in the old covenant, Israel began with the promised baby, Isaac; God's new thing began with the promised infant, Jesus. Isaac was named before he was born; our Lord Jesus was named before He was born. All of God's purpose for Israel as a nation rested in the infant, Isaac. All of God's purpose for His new thing rested in the infant, Jesus. But it was on that night on which our Lord was betrayed that "He took bread, and He broke it, and said, This is My body which is broken for you. And then He took the cup of wine and blessed it, and said, This is My blood of the new covenant which is shed for the remission of your sins" (Mat. 26:26-28). The blood of the new covenant. And all that God purposed to do in His new thing, He secured by the shedding of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, today, 1900 years after the birth, the life, the death, the resurrection, the ascension of Christ, 1900 years and more after Pentecost we are remembering again the birth of our Lord, and meeting together as a company of people in church worship to glorify Him. The question that we need to ask ourselves is this, Is the temple erected? Ah, not the temple of Israel, stones which were torn one from another and the very foundations ripped apart as the soldiers of Titus and Vespasian sought to secure the gold from the furnishings that had melted and run down in the cracks of the rock. We are not speaking of that temple. We are speaking of His new thing, wherein He said, "Ye are the temple of the Holy Ghost, and know ye not that your body is the temple of God" (I Cor. 3:16). Therefore, the first question is Ezra's question: Are you in that relationship with Jesus Christ where it could be said, "Christ is in you the hope of glory." (Col. 1:27b) This we understand to be the intent of Paul's question, when writing to the church at Corinth, He declared, "Examine yourselves, prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Christ be in you except ye be reprobate" (II Cor. 13:5). Salvation is not in a plan. Salvation is not in Scripture verses. Salvation is not even in a decision. Salvation is a person. "He that hath this Person hath life", for life is in this Person is Jesus Christ (I Joh. 5:12). "It is Christ in you, the hope of glory." And it is this One in you that makes you into a Christian. And thus when we would establish the analogy, we would have to say, "Have you come to that place where He has miraculously invaded you, and you have by this invading Presence of our risen Lord, by God the Holy Ghost, become a new creation. Are you a Christian?" Not do you profess to be, but are you a Christian by virtue of His presence.

The next question that is appropriately asked of those who declare, Yes, I am born of God, then the question that needs be raised, "Have the walls been erected? Have the walls of testimony," just as we find in the Epistle to Peter the adding of faith to virtue, and virtue to purity, and on and on, as He would build the walls of testimony. We ask our hearts this morning, Have you built the wall with Nehemiah, the walled testimony, so that when you go into the office it is not necessary for you to signify that you are a Christian by a button on your lapel or by the frequent reference that you make to our Lord, but that somehow your demeanor, your attitude, your work, your total presentation of what you are testifies to the presence of the One who brings life. Is the fruit of the Spirit manifest in your life? Love? And joy? And peace? These are the blocks of the wall of testimony. "Gentleness, goodness, long suffering, meekness, faith, self-control," all of this was ruined by the destruction of sin (Gal. 5:22b-23a). It is possible for you to be born of God, and yet somehow to have availed yourself of the provisions of His love, to have that testimony which exhibits His presence, and is the continuous sermon, constantly being preached by what you are, as well as what you say, that you belong to Christ and that He is not only resident, but He is president in your heart, and in your life.

Our Lord Jesus said, "After that the Holy Ghost is come upon you ye shall be witnesses unto Me" (Act. 1:8). It is the vicarship of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of God by the Spirit that gives the wall of testimony that is to be looked for by the heathen around and about. But we have seen, in the study of Nehemiah, that there were enemies that opposed the erection of the wall. The first enemies that we saw were those that had no part in Israel, and no relationship to the covenant of promise. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and those associated with them were in continuous opposition to Nehemiah. We have likened Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, and all associated with them, to Satan, the princes of darkness, and the demons of the pit that harass, that hinder, ceaselessly work in continuously changing strategy to rob Jesus Christ of the testimony that could come and should come from your life and from the church of which you are a part.

Therefore, we dealt last week with the fact that Nehemiah instructed those that served with him to hold the trowel in one hand and the sword in the other. The sword spoke to us of the authority of the Body of Christ, that authority which He has invested in His church when He said, "You wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, and rulers of the darkness of this age" (Eph. 6:12). And then He said, "Take unto you the whole armour of God, the helmet of salvation, the

breastplate of righteousness, your loins girt about with truth, your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit, and having done all to stand" (Eph. 6:14-20). Stand against this defeated foe. For Christ has turned over to His Church the enforcement of His victory over Satan and the legions and hosts of hell. But we see today that all of the problem in the erection of this testimony was not from outside. Let me refresh your mind in the Scripture that was read. There was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren, the Jews. Not Sanballat, not Tobiah, nor Geshem the Arabian. Now there is an insidious operation within the walls standing in the way of the testimony that God has sought to erect through Nehemiah.

There were those who came to Nehemiah and said, "We, our sons and our daughters are many." Oh it was said before that a large family was a blessing of the Lord, and children were a heritage of the Lord, but now in Israel, because of the dirth, they said, These children that we had, this large family that we have is a weight about us, and a hindrance to us, for we have been pushed into poverty by virtue of the fact that we have had to sell our vineyards and our farms to our own Jewish people, we have had to mortgage them in order to get corn to eat, and food for our children, and then when our farms were mortgaged and our vineyards were given, still we had to feed our children, and the only way we could feed them was to sell our Jewish children to Jewish owners as slaves. And when Nehemiah heard this, he was appalled, overwhelmed, busy as he had been, with all of that which had confronted him from without, the constant plotting, and the incessant opposition of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem the Arabian, and the hosts with them. He had felt that these inside the walls were his force to stand with him against the outer enemy. But instead of that he discovered that what should have been his force was actually his field, and he would have to turn from opposition to a foe without, to deal with internal evil.

May I say that internal evil is always more deadly or dangerous than external evil. You may recall that when Franco with the hosts were marching against the capital city of Spain that he was interviewed by an American newspaper reporter, and he asked, "How will the battle come out?" And Franco said, "The battle is a foregone victory for us." "Why?" "We have one army marching from the north, another from the east, and still a third from the south, and one from the west." "Yes, but the opposition is deeply entrenched." And then he said, "Ah, but we have the 5th column within the walls, and it was the presence of that 5th column in the capital of Spain that sabotaged the efforts of those who would have defended the monarchy and brought about the defeat." You will trace the history of communism in the last 40 years, and you will discover that-to my knowledge-have they conquered any nation by outside war. It has always been by a 5th column. And I submit to you that when our papers try to convince us that our great enemy today in our present conflict are the missiles aimed at our cities in this land, they are simply throwing dust in our eyes, for the opposition for a nation is not from those without, but those within, and it is further proven that that 5th column need be no more than two to three or four percent to successfully conquer and control a nation.

Now it was internal evil in Jerusalem that was the threat to all that God was purposing to do through Nehemiah. For allow the walls to be built, and allow the gates to be built, and allow Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem to be defeated, and if this crime continues everything that God had done was brought to nothing. And so it was necessary to see, that the very worst evil from which anything can suffer is that dangerous, deadly, internal evil. In this case it was the evil of discord. One Jew complaining of another Jew. They were not united in their opposition to Sanballat, or Tobiah, or the Arabians, but they were fighting with each other. This was that which was causing the whole of God's purpose to be brought to nothing, seeds of dissension, and strife were bearing their bitter fruit. Discord was springing up from oppression. Some wanted to exalt themselves at the expense of others and grow rich off of the poverty of others. And so they were willing to take a man's mortgage and insisted upon the mortgaging of his livelihood for the sake of food for his hungry children. And when this was seen, when this was discovered, the evil consequences had spread so far that there was misery, a great cry of the people and their wives, and there was reproach, because it was known everywhere before Nehemiah found it out.

Can't you hear Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem saying, "Well, let them build the wall. We know that everything they are seeking to do is going to be destroyed, because look at the selfishness, look at the pride, look at the viciousness, look at this discord, look at what is going on within the walls, and if we cannot break down the walls, God will send an army to do it." He did it once, and He will do it still again. This is the worst evil from which any group, any organization, any church can suffer. Now what is the way of escape?

We find it. First, the enormity of their crime stirred righteous anger, anger with a holy wrath, roused by a profound sense of the magnitude of the guilt and the imminence of the danger that the guilt presented. And so we find that there was a great cry of the people and of their wives. First, it had to come from those that were affected.

Secondly, it came that there was brought by Nehemiah a tremendous testimony: "And I set a great assembly against them." I am sure that these men that had taken mortgages and taken children into slavery felt quite content that they would never be called to an account, but God has stated and has put His whole character on the issue that sin shall be called into judgment. And sin cannot be covered. This great cry was raised and assembly was brought to testify. Sooner or later it will be done. Oh I know that there can be an attempt to intimidate, but finally someone comes to the place where they say, "We are going to raise our cry." But notice what happened. Notice what this man Nehemiah did.

In verse 7, here is reflective self-control that moved purposefully. He was not emotional. He was not carried about by every wind. He was not stampeded. He was not forced. He said, "I consulted with myself." He consulted with himself. He considered the best means. He did everything he possibly could to find out where responsibility lay, what he should do, how he should do it. He was not like some who would take a club to kill a mosquito on a baby's forehead, and permanently injure the child in their effort to protect from the mosquito. He was not strangling the child in order to get the bread out of its throat. He was concerned for the way by which he could serve the best interest of the entire company. He did not turn out those that had done this. He considered them Jews. He recognized that it was possible for anyone to fall into sin seeing a brother at fault, he did not come brutally against him. He had seen enough of that elsewhere. So he consulted with himself.

And then he secured concerted action. I set a great assembly against them. He was prepared to wait until he could get a concerted action, and thus he directed against them the full force of public sentiment. Then finally it was necessary for him in boldness to take his stand. A time for decided speech and action arrived. So in Nehemiah 5, verse 7 we read, "I rebuked the nobles, the nobles, the leaders." I rebuked the nobles.

In verse 8, "I said unto them, We have redeemed our brethren, those which we found in slavery, we gave our own goods to buy them back and set them free, but you have even sold your brethren." How horrible is this.

And then in verse 11, he established the presence of genuine repentance, "Restore, I pray you, to them this day their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses," and (in verse 13) when they had promised to do it, "he shook his lap."

This, I believe, is what Paul had in mind when he wrote the second epistle to Timothy in the 4th chapter and the 2nd verse and said, "Reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and godliness." For you recognize there were two enemies. There was the outside enemy speaking of Satan and the hosts of hell. But then he saw the necessity of dealing with people. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth and said, "You have allowed in your midst that which brings shame upon you and judgment from God" (I Cor. 4:14). And Paul commanded that the person be dealt with; the person had to be dealt with, not just the principle, and not just the principalities, but also the person. Someone has said, "Unless one puts out when the instant arises, it soon will be that the infection becomes so great that it will be no longer possible to put out all that can happen is to get out."

I trust and pray that the recognition that principalities and powers are to be withstood will never be dimmed in our mind. Remember also that you and I are subject to the censor and the discipline of our brethren. This is one of the reasons why coming into the church one is asked to appear before elders in order that there can be testimony secured that there can be grounds for discipline in relationship to that constituted authority. This is true in government. This is true in all organized society. So we find here that as the firmness came from Nehemiah, repentance came to those who had erred.

First there was the conviction of the sinfulness of what they had done. They had not meant. It had not been their intention to grieve God in this way. They had simply been led aside by the circumstance of opportunity, and so they had done that which grieved God. Now they are called to account, and they discover that they have sinned against the Lord, they are under a great sense of guilt. They acknowledge the genuineness of guilt, and of their repentance by their words, "We will restore. We will require nothing of them. We will do as thou sayest." No self-defense. No trying to prove themselves right. A simple amendment of their life, and then we read in verse 13, "This the people did according to the promise." This is always the way

of escape, the way of return to any child of God. Inevitably it is this. You, in your case, I in mine, are always subject to failure, always subject to sin. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (I Cor. 10:12). There is the possibility that in the days of the week ahead, though you begin this week with full, firm intention of glorifying God, that you will be overtaken in a fault, and I, the possibility remains. For we are of one flesh.

What will we do? Submit to the testimony of truth. Confess and acknowledge our guilt as widely as the injury has been spread, and then to amend and rectify our course, and we have the testimony of His Word that "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin" (I Joh. 1:7). It is a different matter. It would have been entirely different had these who were Jews that had done this thing had failed to see it. Then they would no longer have been justifiably classed as Jews. They would have had to have been put outside the walls as those who were the Ammonites and of the Arabians. But the fact that they were Jews in covenant relation is evidenced by the genuineness of their repentance. But notice, it was not just enough to do that.

We discover that God asks for a walk that protects from a repetition of this failure. It is in Nehemiah 5, the 9th verse. "Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of the Lord, because of the reproach of the heathen." This had done much to shame the name of Christ. Notice some of the reproaches of the world. When the world, oh the world reproaches us for being fools, for believing Christ and seeing our God laying in a manger and pushing the sheep aside in the field before Him. We will accept that gladly. But there are other reproaches that we cannot accept gladly for when the outside world sees and views us and says they discern untruthfulness and dishonesty, and worldly transactions, this is a reproach of the heathen. When they see insincerity and cant in religious utterances, this is a reproach. When they see dissension and tension by professed followers of Christ, this is the reproach. Censoriousness of speech and of spirit, this is a reproach. Gloominess as contrasted with the representation of that happiness and joy to be found in Christ, this is a reproach. Worldly ambition or policy in church life and work, this is a reproach. And these things ought not to be there. Such reproaches. You ought not to walk in a course that brings reproach. A child of God is one that has a new heart, and a new life, and a new nature, and he ought to walk in the fear of the Lord.

What does it mean to walk in the fear of the Lord? Take the analogy of the child in closing. A child in the home fears the parent. What do you mean? Cringes? Terror when he sees the parent coming? No. I do not believe this is what is implied in our relationship to God. To the contrary, I believe that when the father has established the proper rapport with the children, the children understand that as friendly as they can be with the father, and as much fellowship they can have with the father, it is based upon obedience. It is based upon right. And the children know the father so well that they know that when they do something wrong, as much as the father loves them he will not in any wise connive with the evil or tolerate it. So to walk in the fear of the Lord means one can have sweet fellowship with God, delight in His presence, but such confidence in His character that we know that when we grieve God, God loves us too much and Himself too much to stoop to connive. And God will discipline. "To walk in the fear of the Lord." As you go down the highway, you see a man in a gray uniform with a turret light on the top, and you say, "There is a state police. I am glad he is there." Why? To keep the speeders from endangering your life. But, my friend, when you have been going 70 in a 60 mile zone, that turret light flashes in your eyes I want to assure you that that emotion that you feel is not filial trust; that is plain old scare, just fright, and this is what the Word of God means when he is walking in the fear of the Lord, afraid to sin because God is too just to tolerate it. And when that man pulls you to the curb and gets your little book and starts taking down the pertinent details and your heart turns to water, don't you start talking to me about reverential trust. That is a fright of the law, of the law. And this is what Nehemiah said, "We ought to walk in the fear of God," knowing that God will not connive with sin. And every sin will come into judgment. God is who He says He is, and God will do what He has said He will do; and to walk in the fear of the Lord means that His Word becomes the rule of our conduct, His authority becomes the reason for our conduct, and His glory becomes the end of our conduct. Do we walk in the fear of the Lord? And in so doing, we will not fall into the trap that brought shame on Israel but behooves us to fear God, for "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psa. 111:10; Pro. 9:10).

Even you that are here today that do not know the cleansing of His blood, He has said, "He that hath the Son hath life. He that hath not the Son hath not life, and the wrath of God abideth on him" (I Joh. 5:12). You ought to fear God. You that name His name, remember that just because you are a child of God does not give license, for God is too just to look upon sin. And every sin will come into judgment. We ought to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen, our enemies.

Oh, I call you back with me to fear God. Shall we do it? Let us bow our heads in prayer. We stand in Thy presence, our Father, men and women midway in the journey through time into eternity. There are some who have no assurance of their sins forgiven, no sense of pardon or reconciliation. If they could see above them, it would be the sword of Thy justice suspended by the thin hair of Thy patience, growing less strong day by day, for each day that we go on in impenitence treading under our feet, the blood of the everlasting covenant, and considering that the sacrifice of Christ was a needless, wasteful thing, we do despite to the Spirit of Grace. We ask Thee, our Father, for those among us who may not know the Lord Jesus, that today, right now, they may see that He loves them, nail pierced hands extended in entreaty, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mat. 11:28). We ask that they might come. Those of us that have come, our Father, may we realize that the heathen are watching, and grant that we shall so walk that there will be no reproach. Should there be on the part of any or all of us some way in which we have fallen into this greatest of snares, that discord, that dissension, that seeking, that war against brethren, O God, might there be brokenness and confession and washing in the cleansing blood that Thy glory may be unhurt and unhindered, and that Thy name should be honored. We ought to walk in Thy fear, O God, Teach us the fear of the Lord. Move upon us today until we are so convinced that Thou art Who Thou dost say Thou art, and Thou wilt do what Thou hast promised to do, that our hearts respond to Thee, knowing that Thou dost not change at all, but that Thou art ever the same. So bring us to that place of worship and adoration, and of obedience. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Let us stand for the Benediction. "Now unto Him who is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior be glory, and honor, dominion and majesty, now and forever. Amen" (Jud. 1:24-25).

* Reference such as: Delivered at The Gospel Tabernacle Church, New York City on Sunday Morning, December 10, 1961 by Paris W. Reidhead, Pastor.

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